

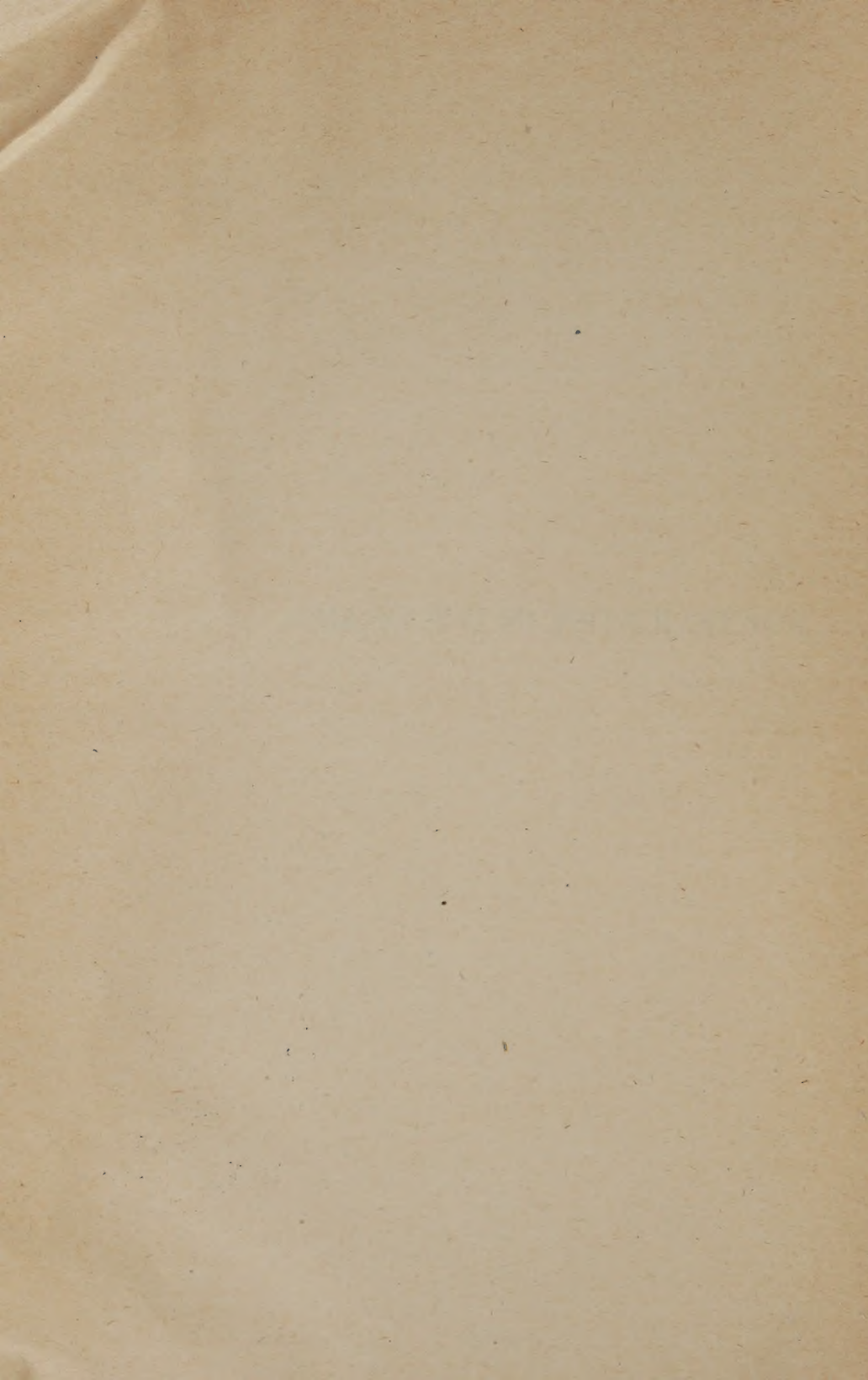
POETIC JUSTICE IN THE DRAMA

By M. A. QUINLAN, C. S. C., PH. D.

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POETIC JUSTICE IN THE DRAMA



POETIC JUSTICE IN THE DRAMA

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of Letters of the Catholic University
of America in Part Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By M. A. QUINLAN, C. S. C., PH. D.

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TO
THE MEMORY OF
MY MOTHER

PREFACE.

The book which is here presented to the public constitutes only a part of a much larger work in which the author has become interested, namely, *The History of Ethical Principles in Literary Criticism*. In the present case no attempt has been made to discuss anything but the historical aspect of the matter. *Poetic Justice in the Drama* is a large subject in itself and admits of a wider range of treatment than has been here attempted. As a problem study it presents the solution of two difficulties; one concerning the Greek origin of the doctrine of rewards and punishments in dramatic art, the other concerning the English basis of the same doctrine. In order to treat these two problems in a satisfactory manner, it was necessary to examine closely the leading sources of literary criticism from Plato to Addison, and to give special attention to certain minor literary critics who flourished in England during the last quarter of the seventeenth century and the first quarter of the eighteenth. To the solution of these two problems has been added a study of the general attitude of literary critics towards the doctrine of poetic justice during the two centuries that have elapsed since Addison's time.

Historically, the drama takes precedence over other literary types that might be studied in connection with this subject, and as a matter of fact

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the controversy that first arose in England in regard to poetic justice was concerned specifically with the drama; but this does not mean that other literary types are to be ignored in making a complete study of this principle of literary art. Criticism of the novel, since the earliest period of the development of the novel, has taken note of the attention which novelists have given this same principle. Narrative discourse of all types, including the epic, affords suitable material for the literary critic who has any interest in advocating the doctrine or in arguing against it; and to make a complete study of poetic justice, it would be necessary to examine literary criticism in its bearing upon the whole field of narrative and dramatic literature.

The study of poetic justice necessarily involves a study of ethical principles in literary art; for the very idea of poetic justice implies a judgment regarding the morality of action. As a result, then, of studying literary criticism, it is possible to come to a partial knowledge of the principles of morality by which a given race of people was governed at some given time. If, for instance, the advocates of poetic justice of one century require that punishment be meted out in atonement for an act which the advocates of poetic justice in another century might be disposed to condone, it is easy to conceive that the difference between critics implies a sort of difference in the prevailing principles of morality. Just what these principles have been in any particular period of the literary history of a race, can be somewhat determined as a result of study the works of contemporaneous literary critics and of such contem-

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poraneous dramatists as recognized in a practical way the principle of poetic justice.

Prominent among the subjects which must be thought of by any one who makes a study of the problem of poetic justice, is that which takes into consideration the aim and end of art. In order to accept or reject the dogma of rewards and punishments in literature, one must carefully consider whether or not it is the aim and end of art to instruct. It was not necessary, however, that the writer should offer any very specific and final answer to this large question. The doctrine of poetic justice has been understood in different ways by literary critics, and has been applied so rigorously by some writers, that the rejection of the doctrine does not necessarily imply a denial that instruction should be the chief aim of literary art. This much may be said as pointing towards an answer: on the one hand the gross violation of the principle of poetic justice, as ordinarily understood, is highly inartistic in its effect; and, on the other hand, absolute conformity to an extreme form of poetic justice works against the best interests of art.

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POETIC JUSTICE IN THE DRAMA

CHAPTER I

Greek Origin of Poetic Justice

ADDISON'S REVOLT

WRITING in the *Spectator* for April 16, 1711, Joseph Addison took the English writers of tragedy to task for constructing their plays in accordance with a certain principle of dramatic art which he described as "a ridiculous doctrine of modern criticism."* For more than a quarter of a century before this time, literary criticism had been making a vigorous campaign against the ethics of the English drama. Beaumont and Fletcher and Jonson and Shakespeare were the most distinguished of the playwrights against whom the attack had been made. Fault was found with these in particular because they failed to observe the law of poetic justice in the distribution of rewards and punishments. Other writers of plays were condemned because of the gross immoralities which they portrayed, and some because they violated the unities of time, place, and action. Addison decided that it was time to put a stop to the excessively rigorous tactics of the critics. He felt sure that

* No. 40. At the end of this volume will be found a list of works to which reference is made in these pages. In that list is given the date and place of publication of the editions from which citations are made.

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English tragedy was not inferior to that upon which the laws of tragedy were founded by Aristotle, and he judged that a true interpretation of those laws would serve not only to justify the practice of artists like Shakespeare, but also to correct the mistakes which later dramatists had made. He did not propose that the dramatist should be free from all moral restraint, but he did object to the limitations imposed on tragedy by such a law as that of poetic justice. Addison's, so far as can be ascertained, was the first formal expression of revolt in England against this doctrine.

In order that there may be a clear understanding of what was Addison's conception of the doctrine of poetic justice, it will be necessary to quote the passage in which the expression of this revolt occurs. "The English writers of tragedy," says Addison, "are possessed with a notion, that when they represent a virtuous or innocent person in distress, they ought not to leave him till they have delivered him out of his troubles, or made him triumph over his enemies. This error they have been led into by a ridiculous doctrine in modern criticism, that they are obliged to an equal distribution of rewards and punishments, and an impartial execution of poetical justice. Who were the first to establish this rule I know not; but I am sure it has no foundation in nature, in reason, or in the practice of the ancients. We find that good and evil happen alike to all men on this side of the grave; and as the principal design of tragedy is to raise commiseration and terror in the minds of the audience, we shall defeat this great end if

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we always make virtue and innocence happy and successful."*

Three observations are to be made in regard to the foregoing quotation. In the first place, it is evident that Addison had in mind Aristotle's definition of tragedy, since he speaks of commiseration and terror as being the emotions which it is the chief design of tragedy to raise. Aristotle's definition is this, "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."† Addison's words refer distinctly to the last of the clauses of this definition, and give us reason therefore to conclude that the study of the development of the idea of poetic justice must take into consideration the views of commentators on that part of Aristotle's definition which refers to the emotions of pity and fear. Addison thought that these emotions could not be aroused if the dramatist always rewarded virtue and with like regularity punished vice. There were others who maintained that this same emotional effect could not be produced unless the dramatist faithfully observed the rule for rewards and punishments in regard to all the characters of the play. A difference of opinions, such as is here indicated, complicates in a special manner the difficult problem of interpreting the famous 'pity

* Ibid.

† *Poetics*, VI.; in Butcher's text, pp. 22-23.

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and fear' clause in Aristotle's definition of tragedy. No passage in the *Poetics* has created more discussion than this, and none has been more variously interpreted. When we come to the discussion of Aristotle's views on the ethical function of poetry, we shall explain Aristotle's reference to the emotions of pity and fear.

The second observation to be made concerning the quotation from Addison is to the effect, that he evidently holds that Aristotle neither instituted nor recommended the doctrine of poetic justice. The sweeping charge that this doctrine has no foundation in the tragedies of the Greeks, is followed by an argument based on Aristotle's idea of tragedy; for he says that if we adhere to this rule of poetic justice, we shall defeat the great end of tragedy which is "to raise commiseration and terror in the minds of the audience." Addison understood the *Poetics* well enough to realize that Aristotle regarded the spectacle of unrewarded virtue as a suitable means of arousing the emotion of pity.

In the third place, it is to be noted that Addison does not know who it was that first established the doctrine of poetic justice. That he professed his ignorance in this matter is in itself sufficient reason to speak of the origin of poetic justice as one of the problems of literary criticism. Dennis, who wrote a reply to Addison, did not regard the problem as a difficult one. He quoted Addison's remarks in part and then made his commentary in these words: "But who were the first who established this rule he is not able to tell. I take it for granted, that a man who is ingenuous

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enough to own his ignorance, is willing to be instructed. Let me tell him then, that the first who established this ridiculous doctrine of modern criticism, was a certain modern critic, who lived above two thousand years ago; and who tells us expressly in the thirteenth chapter of his critical Spectator, which pedants call his Poetic, That since a tragedy, to have all the beauty of which it is capable, ought to be implex and simple, (by the way, Mr. Spectator, you must bear with this critical cant, as we do with your speculations and lucubrations) and ought to move to compassion and terror, for we have already shown that the exciting these passions is the proper effect of a tragical imitation, it follows necessarily, that we must not choose a very good man, to plunge him from a prosperous condition into adversity, for instead of moving compassion and terror, that on the contrary would create horror and would be detested by all the world.

"And does not the same deluded philosopher tell us in the very same chapter that the fable to which he gives second preference, is that which has a double constitution, and which ends by a double catastrophe; a catastrophe favorable to the good and fatal to the wicked. Is not here, Mr. Spectator, a very formal recommendation of the impartial and exact execution of poetical justice? Thus Aristotle was the first who established this ridiculous doctrine of modern criticism."*

The language of Addison's opponent might seem to afford a final answer to the question at

* *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare with some Letters of Criticism to the Spectator*, pp. 40 ff.

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issue, especially since it does not appear that Addison made any formal objection to the proposition that Aristotle was the originator of the doctrine of poetic justice. That Addison was somewhat impressed by the weight of the arguments advanced by various critics in favor of the theory, is evident from the fact that when he next ventured to discuss the subject,* he treated his opponents with more consideration and respect than the tone of his attack would lead one to expect; certain it is that his reply exhibited little of the dogmatism and none of the sarcasm† that characterized the utterances of Dennis. It does not seem that he studied the *Poetics* closely enough to be quite sure that Aristotle was neither the author nor the defender of poetic justice as applied to tragedy.

* *Spectator*, No. 548, Nov. 28, 1712.

† The reply of Dennis, in which Aristotle was mentioned as the author of poetic justice, was practically ignored by Addison. He recognized his opponent only indirectly. Referring to this matter in his *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, p. 408, Professor Lounsbury says: "To this outburst Addison, as usual, made no reply. It was one of his most irritating characteristics. He amused himself, indeed, in an essay, printed about a week later than his previous one, by citing a couple of lines which he called humorous, from a translation of Boileau made by Dennis. The reference suggested the impression that he considered the critic a dunce; but it could as legitimately be construed into a compliment. Dennis was puzzled by it; and though he could not refrain from indulging in further comment, it is clear he did not know how to take what was said. Towards the close of the following year, when the 'Spectator' was nearing its end, Addison returned to the subject. He defended his former position, though without mentioning his critic."

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Two questions have their origin in this eighteenth century controversy about the doctrine of rewards and punishments in poetry; one of these questions concerns the beginnings of the doctrine in the critical literature of Greece, the other concerns the introduction of the doctrine into England. The first of these questions is to receive our immediate attention.

ARISTOTLE'S INFLUENCE IN LITERARY CRITICISM.

It can hardly be denied that Aristotle recognized a form of dramatic art which exhibited the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice; but that he was the author of the doctrine or that he recommended it in any form, is not admitted by the majority of present-day critics. Many go so far as to contend that Aristotle ascribes to poetry no ethical function whatsoever. Professor Butcher, of the University of Edinburgh, is one of those who hold that Aristotle's definition of tragedy does not involve an ethical consideration such as that which is implied in the idea of poetic justice. "The character of the ideal tragic hero," he says, commenting on chapter xiii. of the *Poetics*, "is deduced not from any ethical ideal of conduct, but from the need of calling forth the blended emotions of pity and fear, wherein the proper tragic pleasure resides. The catastrophe by which virtue is defeated and villainy in the end comes out triumphant is condemned by the same criterion; and on a similar principle the prosaic justice, misnamed poetical, which rewards the good man and punishes

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the wicked, is pronounced to be appropriate only to comedy."*

Another writer of our own times, Professor Saintsbury, likewise of the University of Edinburgh, has expressed his opinion in regard to this much-debated question. "Volumes have been written on these few words," he says, referring to the last clause of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, "the chief crux being, of course, the word *katharsis*."† It cannot be said that any of the numerous solutions is in itself and to demonstration correct, but it is clear that the addition is out of keeping with the rest of the definition. Hitherto Aristotle, whether we agree with him or not, has been purely literary, but now he shifts to ethics. You might almost as well define fire in terms strictly appropriate to physics, and then add, 'effecting the cooking of sirloins in a manner suitable to such objects.'"‡ In comparing the remarks of Professor Saintsbury with those of Professor Butcher, it is well to consider the force of the former's assertion that Aristotle "shifts to ethics." This indicates it to be Professor Saintsbury's opinion that in spite of an evident incongruity Aristotle ascribed to tragedy a certain moral purpose. That this opinion implies a dis-

* *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, pp. 208-209.

† The word *katharsis* is the Greek equivalent of the English word *purgation* in the clause, "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." Some translators use the word *purification* in place of *purgation*, but they are in the minority. The interpretation which this essay supports calls for the use of the latter word.

‡ *A History of Literary Criticism*, I., p. 38.

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agreement with the scholarly editor of the *Poetics* is not over-looked by Professor Saintsbury himself, and he makes no "apologies for occasionally differing with him, on the purely critical side,"* and accounts for this by saying that Aristotle's work is "a document which is admittedly very obscure in parts," and that "opinion, not demonstration, must decide in very many cases what is the correct interpretation. Concerning the particular point of interpretation here involved, Professor Saintsbury says, "Although we have no full treatment of comedy, his distaste—almost his contempt—for it is clear; and debatable as the famous 'pity and terror' clause of the definition of tragedy may be, its ethical drift is unmistakeable."†

Professor Butcher, on the other hand, has gone into the study of this clause in considerable detail, and has reached the conclusion that "Aristotle would probably admit that indirectly the drama has a moral influence, in enabling the emotional system to throw off some perilous stuff, certain elements of feeling, which if left to themselves, might develop dangerous energy, and impede the free play of those vital functions on which the exercise of virtue depends. The excitation of noble emotions will probably in time exert an influence on the will. But whatever may be the direct effect of the repeated operation of the *katharsis*, we may confidently say that Aristotle in his definition of tragedy is thinking, not of any such remote result,

* *History of Literary Criticism*, I. p., 31, note.

† *Ibid.*, p. 37.

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but of the immediate end of the art, of the æsthetic function it fulfills."*

On one more point the two eminent professors disagree in regard to Aristotle's definition of tragedy. Professor Saintsbury translates the final clause of the definition as follows, "accomplishing the purgation of such emotions."† Instead of *such*, Professor Butcher uses the word *these*.‡ Attention is here called to this variation in opinions, to emphasize the fact, that some of the leading controversies in English criticism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are possessed of wonderful vitality. So insignificant a detail of criticism as that just mentioned takes us back to the time when men like Sir Philip Sidney spoke of "the high and excellent tragedy. . . that with stirring the effects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of the world."§ About a century later Dryden thought it possible for tragedy to arouse all the emotions in turn,|| and Gildon after him touched upon the same matter in his query, "Why must the tragic poet be confined to move terror and compassion? Why not admiration or even love?"¶ He himself answers the question, saying, "Admiration is too calm a passion for tragedy," and love is "directly opposite to that majesty" which this

* *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry*, p. 249.

† *Hist. Lit. Crit.*, I., p. 33.

‡ *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry*, p. 23.

§ *An Apology for Poetry*, Arber Reprint, p. 45.

|| *Heads of an Answer to Rymer*, in *Works*, XV., p. 383.

¶ *The Complete Art of Poetry*, I., p. 119.

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kind of poetry requires.* Curiously enough, he offers as his own a definition of tragedy which admits of the agitation of other emotions than terror and compassion, for he says, "A tragedy is, therefore, an imitation of some one serious, grave and entire action, of a just length, and contained within the unities of time and place; and which without narration, by means of terror and compassion, purges those passions, and all others which are like them, that is, whose prevalence can throw us into the same, or like misfortunes."†

The fact that the history of literary criticism presents so many conflicting opinions in regard to the meaning of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, makes it worth while to classify these opinions and to attempt to solve the problem along new lines. Those critics who see an ethical consideration in the definition are disposed to argue that Aristotle favored the doctrine of poetic justice; those who go to the other extreme, and deny the existence of any ethical consideration in the definition, must necessarily reject the proposition that Aristotle would have tragedy exhibit the workings of divine providence in regard to the good and the bad. To determine, then, the merits of this controversy in literary criticism is to settle in some measure the question as to Aristotle's position in regard to the doctrine of poetic justice. The earliest efforts made by English critics to make Aristotle sponsor of a law of ethics for tragedy, are not so much to be wondered at, when we consider that some of the

* Ibid.

† Ibid., p. 222.

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best scholars of our own time understand Aristotle in almost the same sense as they did; nor is it surprising that those efforts should meet with persistent opposition, since the foremost of the present-day commentators on the *Poetics* rejects the theory that Aristotle intended to ascribe an ethical function to tragedy.

From what has been said it might be inferred that the early literary critics of England were quite familiar with the *Poetics*. Such, however, was the case only in a limited degree. It must be remembered that the works of Aristotle had been for a long time wholly lost so far as European culture was concerned. Spingarn says that the *Poetics* "was entirely lost sight of during the middle ages,"* and accepts the opinion of Egger that the works of Horace, Cicero, or Quintilian contain no apparent reference to this important document of Greek literature. For centuries, therefore, literary criticism got along without the authority of Aristotle. The first indication of a return to Aristotle occurred about the year 935 when the *Poetics* was translated from the Syriac into Arabic. In the thirteenth century a German named Herman translated into Latin the abridged version of Averroës which had been produced a century earlier. Other Latin editions followed this, but it cannot be shown that the *Poetics* exerted much influence on literary criticism prior to the beginning of the sixteenth century. For a period of about fifty years, following the appearance of Valla's Latin translation in 1498, the scholarship

* *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, p. 16.

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of Italy gave the *Poetics* such attention and study that Aristotle's position as a leading factor in literary criticism was assured. The first critical edition of the *Poetics* was produced at the end of this period by Robortelli; and in the following year, 1549, Segni published the first translation into Italian.

Readers of French, it would seem, became acquainted with Aristotle's *Poetics* in the same year that marked its introduction into Italian. Before the time of the publication of Du Bellay's *Defense et Illustration de la Langue Française*, 1549, the *Poetics* was apparently unknown. At least, it would seem, according to Spingarn, that Du Bellay's predecessors were as little acquainted with the Greek philosopher as if his name were erased from the list of literary critics.* Earlier than this, however, there was a Latin edition of the *Poetics* published at Paris in 1541; but the literary critics of the time were entirely indifferent to the fact. France, then, was fully half century behind Italy in its critical appreciation of Aristotle's *Poetics*; and what is true in this respect with regard to the general field of literary criticism, is likewise true in regard to the special topic concerned in this discussion. It was only in the seventeenth century that the Aristotelian *katharsis* became a subject of controversy in France, whereas the critics of Italy had busied themselves about it a hundred years earlier.

England was still more backward than France in coming to a knowledge of the *Poetics*. It was shortly before the year 1570 that Roger Ascham

* Ibid., p. 184.

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wrote as follows: "When M. Watson in St. Johns College at Cambridge wrote his excellent tragedy of Absalon, M. Cheke, he and I, for that part of true imitation, had many pleasant talks together, in comparing the precepts of Aristotle and Horace *de Arte Poetica*, with the examples of Euripides, Sophocles, and Seneca. Few men, in writing of tragedies in our days, have shot at this mark. Some in England, more in France, Germany, and Italy, also have written tragedies in our time: of the which not one I am sure is able to abide the true touch of Aristotle's precepts and Euripides' examples, save only two that I ever saw, M. Watson's Absalon, and Georgius Buchananus' Jephthe."* This, says Spingarn, is "the first reference to the *Poetics* in England."† It was nearly a century and a half later that Dennis declared Aristotle to be the author of the doctrine of poetic justice, and offered in support of his opinion a citation from the *Poetics* that had already become the basis of controversy in Italy and France.‡ Addison's failure to deny that Aristotle was the author of the doctrine has already been referred to§ as an indication that he had not made a thorough-going study of the famous definition of tragedy.

From the time of Roger Ascham's remark on the excellence of Aristotle's precepts, down to the time of the Dennis-Addison controversy, there was a gradual but very slow development of respect for

* *The Schoolmaster*, in Ascham's English Works, pp. 284.

† *Hist. Lit. Crit.*, p. 308.

‡ *Loc. cit.* p. 5.

§ *Loc. cit.* p. 6.

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the author of the *Poetics*. After Ascham's *Schoolmaster*, came Lodge's *Defence of Poetry* in 1579, a work which was written in reply to Gosson's *School of Abuse*. The *Defence* contains more than one reference to Aristotle, but none seems to show that Lodge had given much time to the study of the *Poetics*. In one case he appears to find fault with Aristotle, ascribing to him a complaint against poets; but, as a matter of fact, Aristotle mentioned the objection only to explain it away. Lodge says, "I with thee will seek out some abuse in poetry, which I will seek for to disprove by reason, first pronounced by no small bird, even Aristotle himself. Poetae (saith he) multa mentiuntur."* Aristotle was not, of course, the author of the objection. It was Plato who complained that the poets narrate falsehoods; Aristotle was the defender of the poets. Four years later,† when Sidney wrote his *Apology for Poetry*, Aristotle seemed to be better understood. Sidney uses the definition of tragedy as found in the *Poetics*,‡ cites Aristotle's opinion on the value of history as compared with poetry,§ quotes from his ethics to show that the poet performs the office of a teacher,|| and places

* In Smith's *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I., p. 73.

† Sidney's *Apology* was written in 1583, or earlier, and was first published in 1595. In the meantime, the manuscript was in circulation to such an extent that its influence in literary criticism was felt long before the date of its publication. Sir John Harington makes reference to Sidney's work in his own *Apology* which was published in 1591.

‡ In the Arber Reprint, p. 26.

§ Ibid., p. 35.

|| Ibid., p. 39.

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his precepts on an equal basis with "common reason" in making an argument for unity of time.*

In 1586 William Webbe published a *Discourse of English Poetry* in which appear certain references to Aristotle. These are numerous enough but do not represent any increase in his popularity. *The Art of English Poetry*, published in 1589 and ascribed to Richard Puttenham,† mentions the name of Aristotle only twice, a fact worthy of more than passing notice, since the subject was treated in a manner that might call for citations from the *Poetics*, and since also the treatise was greater in length than any similar study in literary criticism that had been published prior to that time in England. Next in chronological order comes Sir John Harington who in 1591 published his translation of *Orlando Furioso* and with it a preface that was sub-titled *A Brief Apology of Poetry*. He seems to be familiar with Aristotle's definition of tragedy;‡ he mentions him with Plato as opposed to the allegorical use of poetry,§ couples his name with "the best censurers of poesie,"|| and regards it as a meritorious thing in Ariosto that he followed the rules of Aristotle "very strictly."¶ Francis Meres has this paragraph in his *Wits Treasury*, published in 1598: "As Georgius Buchananus' Jephthae amongst all modern tragedies

* Ibid., p. 63.

† This work is sometimes ascribed to George Puttenham, but the more reliable opinion favors Richard as the author.

‡ In Smith's *Eliz. Crit. Essays*, II., p. 200.

§ Ibid., p. 203.

|| Ibid., p. 216.

¶ Ibid.

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is able to abide the touch of Aristotle's precepts and Euripides's examples: so is Bishop Watson's Absalon."* This is at once a reminder of what Roger Ascham said in regard to the same matter; and an indication of the growing popularity of Aristotle.

The illustrations that have been drawn from the writings of Ascham, Lodge, Sidney, Webbe, Puttenham, Harington, and Meres, to show the development of respect for Aristotle in English literary criticism during the last half of the sixteenth century, must not be regarded as an evidence of any unusual dependence upon the author of the *Poetics*. Ben Jonson, also, was an admirer of Aristotle, and so was Milton. "But despite all this," says Spingarn, "the English independence of spirit never failed; and before the French influence we can find no such thing in English criticism as the literary dictatorship of Aristotle."† Nevertheless, this same writer observes that before the close of the seventeenth century Renaissance Aristotelianism achieved a certain degree of supremacy in England where, in the form of French classicism, it characterized the work of Dryden.‡ It was at this time that Rymer endeavored to widen the influence of Aristotle in England not only by using his name and authority to support his own critical opinions, but also by translating from the French, Renè Rapin's *Reflections on Aristotle's Poetics*.

It must not be supposed, however, that French

* Ibid., p. 322.

† *Hist. Lit. Crit.*, p. 309.

‡ Ibid., p. 310.

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classicism represented fully the French attitude toward Aristotle. There were in France two schools of literary criticism, one of which derived its principles from the theory and practice of the ancients, while the other derived its principles from the theory and practice of the moderns. Each was well enough able to expound the principles to which it adhered; but the argument which resulted cannot be said to have accomplished much for literary criticism. The reason for this is, that they did not understand each other. On both sides there was a tendency towards exaggeration and excessive insistence that there was but one rule of literary faith. Aristotle was, of course, the great authority upon whom the ancients, as they were called, depended, and consequently his works became a sort of battle-ground upon which the rival schools contended. It was necessary not only to translate Aristotle into French but also to interpret his meaning after the translation had been made. Owing to the fact that Aristotle had been lost sight of during the middle ages, Horace became the chief authority of classical antiquity; upon his *Ars Poetica* was based the traditional theory of poetry. When Aristotle came into vogue, it was presumed that Horace was merely his interpreter, in many things, and that the doctrines for which Horace had been cited as an authority must be found in the *Poetics* of Aristotle. They did not stop to think that Greek literature might be the basis of critical opinions of which Aristotle was not the author, nor did they advert to the fact that a portion of that literature was produced after the time that the *Poetics* was written. That tragedy should concern

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itself with the deeds of princes, and comedy with the deeds of common people, was a rule of dramatic art that came into vogue after the time of Aristotle; but it seems that this fact was unknown to the French disciples of Aristotle. They discovered in his *Poetics* a phrase that suited their purpose, and with this as a basis of argument they confirmed the traditional distinction between tragedy and comedy. The error into which they fell in this respect is pointed out by Professor Butcher in his excellent work on Aristotle's *Poetics*. "In all this misapprehension," he says, "there is just one grain of solid fact. Aristotle does undoubtedly hold that actors in tragedy ought to be illustrious by birth and position. The narrow and trivial life of obscure persons cannot give scope for a great and significant action, one of tragic consequences. But nowhere does he make outward rank the distinguishing feature of tragic as opposed to comic representation. Moral nobility is what he demands; and this on the French stage, or at least with French critics—is transformed into an inflated dignity, a courtly etiquette and decorum, which seemed proper to high rank. The instance is one of many in which literary critics have wholly confounded the teaching of Aristotle."* The two

* Aristotle's *Theory*, pp. 220-221. This idea of tragedy continued to be common in Italy after the critics had become acquainted with Aristotle. Daniello, in his *La Poetica*, 1536, says that the comic poets "deal with the most familiar and domestic, not to say base and vile operations; the tragic poets, with the deaths of high kings and the ruins of great empires." According to Giraldis Cintio, in his *Discorso Sulle Comedie e Sulle Tragedie*, 1543, tragedy and comedy "differ in that the former imitates the illustrious and royal, the

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French critics upon whose judgment Professor Butcher offers this commentary, were the Abbe D'Aubignac and Dacier. To these he adds the name of Corneille* whose interpretation of Aristotle was in some instances quite erroneous as such, but very defensible as a dramatic theory. Corneille attempted to use the authority of Aristotle in defence of certain features in his own dramatic writings.

Such were some of the peculiarities that characterized the return of classic models in France, and chief among these peculiarities was a disposition to make Aristotle responsible for certain doctrines which he had not taken into consideration. Dacier's tribute to him is forceful, to say the least. In his discussion of the *Poetics* he takes occasion to reprimand an Italian commentator for pretending to discover an inconsistency between Holy Scriptures and the *Poetics*, and considers it out of the question that "Divinity and Holy Scriptures could ever be contrary to the sentiments of nature on which Aristotle found his judgments."† In a similar manner the same kind of reverence was expressed by Roger Bacon when he declared that "Aristotle

* *Aristotle's Theory*, p. 304.

† Note I., chap. III., Dacier's French translation, quoted by Butcher, p. 325.

latter the popular and civil." Robertelli held substantially the same view in his commentaries on Aristotle in 1548. For these citations and for further development of the subject, see Spingarn's *History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance*, pp. 61 ff.

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hath the same authority in philosophy that the Apostle Paul hath in divinity."*

To Aristotle has been ascribed, as we have already shown, the authorship of the doctrine of poetic justice. Before questioning the truth of this assertion, it was advisable to indicate what was the position which Aristotle held in the field of literary criticism during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Having completed this preliminary task, sufficiently to serve our purpose, and having shown that there was a disposition to ascribe to his authority the rules of literary art which had been held in traditional reverence as a heritage from classical antiquity, it remains to show that the doctrine of poetic justice was very generally recognized in European criticism as soon as the *Poetics* of Aristotle began to have an influence on the critics.

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More than a century and a half before the time of the Dennis-Addison controversy the literary critics of Italy had referred to the doctrine of poetic justice as one of the requirements of the drama. Giraldi Cintio, in his discussion of the rules of poetry in 1543, modifies the classic law of tragedy, that there should be no deaths represented on the stage, and favors the representation of such deaths as are not exceedingly painful, if they may serve the ends of justice. He regards it the end of tragedy, and of comedy also, to conduce to virtue. Vicious actions must be so portrayed, through the medium

* Quoted by Butcher, p. 325.

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of terror and misery that the spectators will fear to imitate such actions.*

Minturno's idea of tragedy, set forth in his treatise *De Poetica* in 1559, has a requirement favoring poetic justice in so far as the wicked are concerned, for he thinks that poetry should act as a "warning to men against pride of rank, insolence, avarice, lust, and similar passions."† We can hardly imagine that he is thinking of producing the desired effect unless through the punishment of wrong-doing.

Scaliger, in his *Poetics*, published in 1561, holds views on poetic justice that are essentially the same as those for which Rymer and Dennis became famous more than a century later. Spingarn has summarized Scaliger's opinions on tragedy in these words: "the aim of tragedy, like that of all poetry, is a purely ethical one. It is not enough to move the spectators to admiration and dismay, as some critics say Aeschylus does; it is also the poet's function to teach, to move, and to delight. The poet teaches character through actions, in order that we should embrace and imitate the good, and abstain from the bad. The joy of evil men is turned in tragedy to bitterness, and the sorrow of good men to joy."‡ Particular attention is to be given to this quotation, for the reason that Spingarn's first remark upon his own summary of the opinions of this six-

* These observations and others of the same kind, dealing with the Italian critics of the sixteenth century, are based on Spingarn's analysis of the works of the renaissance critics, in his *History of Literary Criticism*, pp. 68 ff.

† Ibid., p. 70.

‡ Ibid., pp. 78-79.

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teenth century critic bears directly on the subject we are investigating. "Scaliger," he says, "is here following the extreme view of poetic justice which we have found expressed in so many of the renaissance writers. . . . For Scaliger the moral aim of the drama is attained both indirectly, by the representation of wickedness ultimately punished and virtue ultimately rewarded, and more directly by the enunciation of moral precepts throughout the play." Commenting elsewhere on the same subject, Spingarn says that Scaliger limits tragedy more than Aristotle does, for Aristotle admits of such as have a happy ending, while Scaliger requires that all tragedies shall have an unhappy ending.*

It is hardly fair to Scaliger that this criticism of Spingarn's should be allowed to pass without discussion. While it is true that Aristotle, speaking of plays that have a happy ending puts them in the same class with those that have an unhappy ending, calling them tragedies, it is nevertheless very evident that Aristotle thinks that such plays partake of the nature of comedies rather than tragedies, because the pleasure which is derived from them "is not the true tragic pleasure."† The reason that he appears to call them by the name of tragedies is, that he desires to treat with some deference the opinions of other critics who think that the best type of tragedy is that which has a happy ending. But this is not the only reason. He was deducing principles from the actual practice of the art as it was found in Greek literature, not theorizing on

* Ibid., p. 83.

† *Poetics*, XIII., in Butcher's text, p. 45.

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plays of his own imagination, and he discovered that some plays showed a combination of the effects of pure tragedy and pure comedy. These, of course, had a happy ending; they also had an unhappy ending. Both effects were presented in the same play, one involving the punishment of the wicked, the other involving the reward of the good. Plays of this kind are good illustrations of the doctrine of poetic justice; Aristotle says that they please the people; but he holds that they do not give us the true tragic pleasure, and for this reason they are not to be regarded as tragedies in the strict sense of Aristotle's definition.

It is such a type of play as this that falls within the limits of tragedy designated by Scaliger. There must, of course, be an unhappy ending,—that is always necessary in tragedy; there must also be a happy ending in so far as the virtuous persons of the play are concerned. Such a combination gives us the “opposite catastrophe for the good and the bad,”* and is disapproved of by Aristotle, who limits true tragedy to the representation of the misfortunes and unhappy end of persons who are not without defects and human weaknesses. To say, then, that Scaliger limits tragedy more than Aristotle does is to go against the evidence in the case. The reverse is probably true. In its proper place we shall discuss at greater length Aristotle's definition of tragedy.

When Scaliger published his *Poetics*, English literary criticism had not yet a beginning, and before that time the playwrights of England had not produced a single tragedy; nevertheless, we have reason

* Ibid.

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to know that the law of poetic justice was one of the first dramatic requirements recognized by those who subjected the English stage to censorship and rules.* In France the same thing holds true to some extent. At any rate, it was not long before the writers of tragedy made a very formal attempt at constructing plays according to the conditions imposed by poetic justice. Racine, whose work belongs to the last half of the seventeenth century, thought it quite proper to call attention to this feature of his art when he wrote the preface to his *Phédre*. He prides himself upon the fact that he treats virtue and vice according to their merits; the passions, he says, are presented to the eyes only to show the disorder of which they are the cause, the least faults being severely punished. It is his contention that poetry should serve an ethical purpose, and he argues that the ancient tragic poets made of the theatre a school wherein virtue was taught not less effectively than in the school of philosophy.†

* An argument on this proposition will be found in the next chapter.

† Butcher's work on Aristotle, p. 226, contains the following citation from Racine's Preface: "Ce que je puis assurer, c'est que je n'en ai point fait où la vertu soit plus mise en jour que dans celle-ci; les moindres fautes y sont sévèrement punies: la seule pensée du crime y est regardée avec autant d'horreur que le crime même; les faiblesses de l'amour y passent pour de vraies faiblesses; les passions n'y sont présentées aux yeux que pour montrer tout le désordre dont elles sont cause; et le vice y est peint partout avec des couleurs qui en font connaître et haïr la difformité. C'est là proprement le but que tout homme qui travaille pour le public doit se proposer; et c'est ce que les premiers

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In the long period of time that intervened between the days of Aristotle and those of Cintio, Minturno, and Scaliger, there are only a few names that need be mentioned in connection with the story of dramatic criticism. Eratosthenes, who flourished in the second century B. C., maintained that "the aim of the poet always is to charm the mind not to instruct."* Plutarch held the same opinion about two centuries later. Horace, of course, favored the blending of the two effects, as is manifest from the well-known verse:

Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci.

Cyril and Tertullian, Fathers of the Church at the beginning of the third century, emphasized the ethical consideration when they maintained that stage-plays were injurious to religion. Longinus, who belongs to the end of the third century and the beginning of the fourth, held strongly for the ethical requirement. Saintsbury points out the influence which this writer had on Dennis, about whom he makes the following remark: "In his three chief books of abstract criticism he endeavors to elaborate with Longinus in part for code, and with Milton

* Butcher, p. 201.

poètes tragiques avaient en vue sur toute chose. Leur théâtre était une école où la vertu n'était pas moins bien enseignée que dans les écoles des philosophes. Aussi Aristote a bien voulu donner des règles du poème dramatique; et Socrate, le plus sage des philosophes, ne dédaignait pas de mettre la main aux tragédies d'Euripide. Il serait à souhaiter que nos ouvrages fussent aussi solides et aussi pleins d'utiles instructions que ceux de ces poètes."

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for example, a noble, indeed, and creditable, but utterly arbitrary and hopelessly narrow theory of poetry as *necessarily* religious."* After Longinus, came those who sought to find in pagan poetry such useful lessons as might be discovered by means of an allegorical interpretation; this method was applied to Vergil's Aeneid by Fulgentius, who flourished about the first half of the sixth century. Here again was an attempt to give prominence to the ethical function of poetry. A practical illustration of this principle is found in the writings of Dante and Boccaccio, for with these authors the allegorical meaning was not an afterthought or a forced interpretation of literary criticism.

Side by side, however, with the account of these efforts to ascribe to poetry an ethical function, is to be placed the record of views to the contrary. It will not be necessary to do this in detail, but only to refer to the fact in a summary of the situation. We have mentioned Eratosthenes as one who held out for the æsthetic rather than ethical in poetry. Plutarch was referred to as advocating the same doctrine. Robortelli, Magge, Vettori, Castlevetro, and Varchi, may be named as sixteenth century critics in Italy who regarded the æsthetic function of poetry as more important than the ethical. There was a blending of both opinions by some other writers, as, for example, by Augustinus Moravus Olmucensis who in 1493 defined poetry as "a metrical structure of true or feigned narration, composed in suitable rhythm or feet, and adjusted to utility

* *Hist. Lit. Crit.*, II., p.

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and pleasure.”* In this, we have nothing of Aristotle, but rather a deduction from Horace. Daniello and Minturno, who belong to the middle half of the sixteenth century, recognize the importance of both functions, but in an unequal degree, the former emphasizing pleasure, the latter giving first place to instruction. Some, as for instance Guarino, who flourished about the same time as Daniello and Minturno, went to the extreme of denying that poetry should have any moral effect. On all sides, of course, poetry was admitted to have a certain æsthetic function. Differences of opinion arose only in regard to the question whether or not poetry should also instruct. The consequence was, that critical opinion was divided on the subject in a manner that might be illustrated by a series of mathematical ratios representing the relative importance of pleasure and instruction as ends of poetry. The judgments of some critics might be reduced to a ratio of 1 to 1; in other cases the ratio would be 2 for pleasure, 3 for instruction; 1 for pleasure 3 for instruction; or 1 for pleasure, 0 for instruction. This represents in a general way the attitude of Italian critics of the sixteenth century, and earlier, towards a problem that has involved an endless amount of discussion of the *Poetics* of Aristotle. And the discussion is not yet ended.

In order that we may the better understand what was Aristotle's idea regarding the moral function of poetry, it will be necessary to take note of what had been said on the subject by Plato who preceded him in point of time and was actually

* Ibid., p. 28.

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his teacher. By so doing we shall be in a position to defend the proposition that an ethical effect was intended by Aristotle in the famous 'pity and fear' clause of his definition of tragedy, but not—be it said—the ethical effect usually thought of in connection with the idea of poetical justice. This means that we shall be able to advance a plausible interpretation based upon reasons somewhat different from any that have gained prominence in literary criticism. We shall also be able to show that Plato recommended the doctrine of poetic justice, thereby making it impossible for Aristotle to have been first to establish it.

PLATO'S DOCTRINE OF POETIC JUSTICE.

Plato was born in 428 or 427 B. C., and died in 347 B. C. He flourished, to use a comprehensive expression, about 40 years before Aristotle, who was his pupil; and he was preceded in Greek literature by that group of distinguished writers who helped to add lustre to the age of Pericles. Euripides and Sophocles died when he was about twenty-two years of age, and Aeschylus had been dead nearly thirty years when Plato was born. The glorious age of Greek tragedy was just passing away when he was beginning to formulate his views about law, philosophy, and literature.

The two of Plato's books which will be of most service to us in our investigation are his *Republic* and his *Laws*. It is impossible to determine the exact chronology of all his works, but that fact makes little difference to us, since sufficient is known for our purpose. Wright in his *History of Greek Literature*

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takes it for granted, on the authority of Aristotle, that the *Laws* was Plato's latest work.* In both the *Laws* and the *Republic* there are passages which have a direct bearing upon the problems we are trying to solve, and for this reason these two books deserve special attention. Whether or not either of these treatises represents Plato's critical opinions rather than mere hypothetical considerations, is in itself a problem with which we are not now concerned. They stand in the history of literature as documents with which literary criticism has a right to be acquainted, and they have a special value since they help us to understand Aristotle's theory of poetry. In both works there are evidences that Plato not only recognized the principle of poetic justice but also applied it rigorously. Inasmuch as his *Republic* contains the earlier expression of opinion on this subject, we shall consider it first.

"The *Republic* of Plato," says Professor Jowett, "is the longest of his works with the exception of the *Laws*, and it is certainly the greatest of them."† It is his masterpiece, the model upon which imitators have worked in their efforts to paint a picture of the ideal state. Plato had witnessed the failure of democracy in Athens; the glorious days that had made this splendid city in Attica the centre of the world's civilization, were passing away, never to return. Plato observed the fact and endeavored to find out the cause. The Athenian constitution was defective in many respects, and it was not surprising

* *A Short History of Greek Literature*, p. 383.

† *The Dialogues of Plato*. See Introduction and Analysis, III., p. 1.

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to him that the consequences should be disastrous. So he wrote his *Republic*, and afterwards his *Laws*, to picture the ideal state. A very concise summary of what Plato considers the necessary characteristics of such a state is contained in the following passage taken from Wright's account of Plato: "Community of property, the abolition of the family, universal brotherhood based on the possibility that any man may be one's brother, state regulation of the breeding of citizens, provisions against race-suicide, equality of the sexes on the ground that there is no intellectual difference between them, compulsory education, the compulsory vote—for all these, though they were not all original with Plato, one may turn to the *Republic* or the *Laws*."* It may be surprising that this summary contains no reference to poetry or the poets. But that such a reference is omitted is no proof that poetry and the poets do not receive their share of attention from Plato.

The *Republic* is divided into ten books and is distributed through 338 good sized pages in Professor Jowett's translation. The first half of Book III., which is about forty pages in length, is devoted to a discussion of the ethics of poetry. It is important that this discussion be reduced to a summary that will show in what way Plato treated not only the doctrine of poetic justice itself, but also those questions which are closely related to the doctrine, such, for instance, as the arousing of the emotions. To make the summary more complete it will be necessary to add the last eight pages of Book II., making a total of more than 1000 lines of the text.

* *Short History*, p. 386

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The length of this discussion of poetry and the poets is very significant, since it is not generally admitted that there is in all Aristotle's *Poetics* a single sentence that deals directly with the ethical aspect of the art; it is significant also by reason of the fact that the literary critics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries based their ethical requirement for poetry largely upon their interpretation of Aristotle, little thinking that a better basis would be found in Plato who was popularly known to them as one who would banish poets from his ideal commonwealth.

It is understood, of course, that the *Republic* is set forth in the form of a dialogue in which Socrates appears as the chief speaker; but it will not be advisable to make any distinctions based on this fact. We shall ascribe the opinions directly to Plato, and thus conform to the generally accepted theory that he used the dialogue as a literary form for the expression of his own views.

The subject of poetry is introduced under the head of education. The ideal republic must give proper instruction to the young. This subject he treats under two heads, gymnastics and music,—the former for the body, the latter for the soul. Under the head of music he introduces literature, and his first observation is, that there must be "a censorship of the writers of fiction."* He objects to Homer and Hesiod, because they narrated things which were not true, such as the sufferings of Cronus which were inflicted upon him by his son; the reason for this objection is, that "the young man

* Jowett, III., p. 59.

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should not be told that in committing the worst of crimes he is far from doing anything outrageous; and that even if he chastises his father when he does wrong, in whatever manner, he will only be following the example of the first and greatest among the gods."* Even if the incident of the poet has an historical basis, Plato objects to its recital if it may serve as a bad example.† Surely this kind of an opinion should be approved by Rymer and by Dennis after him.

Wrong-doing and the consequences thereof constitute a necessary element in tragedy. This being true, we can make it appear that Plato was opposed to tragedy because of this fact. "It is most important," he says, "that the tales which the young first hear should be models of virtuous thoughts;"‡ therefore, he would try to keep from the minds of the young the very knowledge of such a thing as wrong-doing, quarreling and battles, his advice being, that "we shall never mention the battle of the giants, or let them be embroidered on garments; and we shall be silent about the innumerable other quarrels of gods and heroes with their friends and relatives."§ From this it would seem that poetry must not deal with evil deeds; but the actual conclusion he draws is not so restrictive. He makes provision for the use of tragic poetry, and discusses the manner in which the poet may depict suffering and wrong-doing.|| In making this exception in favor of the writer of tragedy, he first determines in a philosophical fashion

* Ibid., p. 60.

† Ibid., p. 61

§ Ibid.

‡ Ibid.

|| Ibid.

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that God cannot be the author of evil, and then places upon the poet the obligation of conforming to this truth in his writings. The passage which gives the poet his license to write tragedy should be quoted in full, because it contains a very important declaration in favor of poetic justice. The passage is as follows: "Neither will we allow our young men to hear the words of Aeschylus, that 'God plants guilt among men when he desires utterly to destroy a house.' And if a poet writes of the sufferings of Niobe—the subject of the tragedy in which these iambic verses occur—or of the house of Pelops, or of the Trojan war, or on any similar theme, either we must not permit him to say that these are the works of God, or if they are of God, he must devise some explanation of them such as we are seeking; he must say that God did what was just and right and they were the better for being punished: but that those who are punished are miserable, and that God is the author of their misery—the poet is not permitted to say; though he may say that the wicked are miserable because they require to be punished,* and are benefitted by receiving punishment from God; but that God being good is the author of evil to any one is to be strenuously denied, and not to be said or sung or heard in verse or prose by any one whether old or young in any well ordered commonwealth. Such a fiction is suicidal, ruinous, impious."†

It is hard to discover any reason for supposing

* This kind of theology is a reminder of the Roman Catholic doctrine that the souls in purgatory suffer willingly.

† Jowett, III., p. 63.

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that Plato was not a rigorist in the matter of poetic justice. It is clear that he could not tolerate the idea of having wickedness triumph in poetical narrative, because it was contrary to his idea of eternal justice, and also because it would serve as an incentive to evil for those who might read such a narrative or see it represented on the stage. How important was the thought of justice itself in helping him to arrive at this conclusion, one can best indicate by calling attention to the fact that the whole treatise is largely an application of Plato's theory of justice, a definition of which is given in the first part of Book I.

The next notable passage in the portion of the work which we are considering is one which deals with the emotion of fear. Tragedy, according to Aristotle, should arouse the emotions of pity and fear, an opinion which has been accepted by nearly all literary critics since his time. Plato thinks differently. At any rate, he disapproves of those passages in the poets that are likely to make men fear death or pity any man who is to die. Aristotle maintained that tragedy arouses the emotions only to purge them; and Plato should have held to the same kind of opinion, as may be judged from the following passage in the *Laws*: "when mothers want their restless children to go to sleep they do not employ rest, but, on the contrary, motion—rocking them in their arms; nor do they give them silence, but they sing to them and lap them in sweet strains."* The implied line of reasoning is this, that fear may be overcome by fear, or that familiarity with fear

* Jowett, V., p. 171.

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makes men proof against fear. Aristotle would probably agree to this, but Plato does not. We are to draw a different conclusion from his reference to the rocking of restless children. He himself says that "there is a good deal to be said in favor of this treatment;"* but he qualifies the assertion by adding that "we ought to infer from these facts, that every soul which from youth upward has been familiar with fears, will be more liable to fear, and every one will allow that this is the way to form a habit of cowardice and not of courage."† In the *Republic* he makes his meaning very clear on this point. After quoting an objectionable passage from Homer, he boldly declares: "let us have no more lies of that sort. Neither must we have mothers under the influence of the poets scaring their children with a bad version of these myths—telling how certain gods, as they say, 'Go about by night in the likeness of so many strangers and in divers forms;' but let them take heed lest they make cowards of their children, and at the same time speak blasphemy against the gods."‡

It seems to be quite clear that Plato was unwilling to think that a repeated stimulation of the emotion of fear would make men courageous. It is true that the citations have a direct bearing upon the education of children, and for this reason one might be disposed to lessen the importance of the conclusion to be drawn; but Plato's view was not a narrow view. His theory in regard to the emotion of fear referred to adults as well as to children, a fact that is made quite apparent in the opening

* Ibid.

† Ibid.

‡ Jowett, III., p. 65.

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sentences of Book III. of the *Republic*. There he takes account of both fear and pity, and he reasons somewhat in this order: If men are to be courageous, they must learn lessons that "will take away the fear of death,"* and consequently take away the thought of suffering in the world to come. "Can he be fearless of death," Plato asks, "or will he choose death in battle rather than defeat and slavery, who believes the world below to be real and terrible?"† After answering this question in the negative, he goes on to say that "we must assume control over the narrators of this class of tales as well as over the others, and beg them not simply to revile, but rather to commend the world below, intimating to them that their descriptions are untrue, and will do harm to our future warriors."‡ Therefore he will obliterate from the *Odyssey* the following line, "I would rather be a serf on the land of a poor and portionless man than rule over all the dead who have come to nought."§ Likewise would he expunge many another passage to be found in the works of Homer. It is not proper, he says, that men and boys "should fear slavery more than death."|| Then he proceeds "to get rid of the weepings and wailings of famous men,"¶ by showing that "the good man will not consider death terrible to any other good man who is his comrade... and therefore he will not sorrow for his departed friend as though he had suffered anything terrible. . . Then we will once more entreat Homer and the other poets

* Ibid., p. 68.

† Ibid.

‡ Ibid.

§ Od. XI., 489.

|| Jowett, III., p. 69.

¶ Ibid., p. 70.

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not to depict Achilles, who is the son of a goddess, first lying on his side, then on his back, and then on his face; then starting up and sailing in a frenzy along the shores of the barren sea; now taking the sooty ashes in both his hands and pouring them over his head; or weeping and wailing in the various modes which Homer has delineated."* In this manner he proceeds to illustrate what should be stricken from the works of the poets, in order that men may not be induced to express feelings of commiseration. He thinks that the setting forth of such examples of weakness in the actions of heroes and divine beings would give men a means of justifying such conduct in their own lives, in consequence of which they would lack a spirit of shame and self-control, and would "be always whining and lamenting on slight occasions."† In like manner he develops an argument against poetry that excites laughter,‡ or describes intemperance,§ or depicts immoral conduct.||

But all this theory, it may be said, deals with the poet's treatment of the deeds of "gods and demi-gods and heroes and the world below."¶ That is quite true, and Plato himself called attention to the fact; but this does not take away from the importance of the principle laid down, nor in particular should it be an affective argument against Plato's position in regard to poetic justice. It happens that what follows gives greater force to what has been already said by the philosopher. He himself

* Ibid.

† Ibid., p. 71.

‡ Ibid.

§ Ibid., p. 73.

|| Ibid.

¶ Ibid., p. 76.

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asks the question, "what shall we say about men?"* Poets and story tellers, he says, in answer to this question, "are guilty of making the gravest mis-statements when they tell us that wicked men are often happy, and the good miserable; and that injustice is profitable when undetected, but that justice is a man's own loss and another's gain—these things we shall forbid them to utter, and command them to sing and say the opposite."† Here we have a most explicit statement in regard to poetic justice. Plato requires that poetry shall depict the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and will allow no exception to this rule. Were a tragedy constructed according to this rule, Aristotle would find fault with it, saying that the pleasure to be derived from it would be proper rather to comedy. Plato would not only praise such a tragedy, but he would reject from the realm of poetry any play that should violate the rule of poetic justice; and the author of the play would be banished from the ideal commonwealth. His rule applies not to tragedy only, but to all kinds of poetry that represent the actions of men. Of course, there can be no strict application of the principle to the representation of the actions of the gods, because Plato maintains that they should not be portrayed as doing any wrong.

The mere fact that the foregoing enunciation of the doctrine of poetic justice is stated only conditionally in that portion of the *Republic* from which it is taken should detract in no way from the importance which is here given to it. The condition referred

* Ibid.

† Ibid.

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to does not effect the principle itself but rather a question of relativity in regard to justice; and because he has not yet determined what is the essence of justice or what advantage a man possesses in seeming to be just, he fails to discuss the whole question in detail. "Enough," he says, "of the subjects of poetry: let us now speak of the style."*

Here we may draw to a close our citations from Plato's *Republic*. The fact that he will not accept poets into his ideal commonwealth is not an argument against ideal poetry, but only an argument against poetry as he found it. Euripides had praised tyrants, saying that they are wise, and therefore he should be banished;† others had depicted improbabilities and untruths, and, like Homer, had made men appear pitiful in their misfortunes rather than courageous,—therefore they must be banished; and some had portrayed the triumph of villainy, a disedifying lesson to be taught,—these, likewise, are to be banished from Plato's Utopia. It is not necessary to emphasize further the importance of all this as an argument against the assertion of Dennis that Aristotle was the first to establish the doctrine of poetic justice.

That Plato adhered to his opinion on the ethical import of poetry and insisted on the doctrine of poetic justice, is evident from what he says on the subject in his *Laws*, which, as we said, was the latest of his works. No attempt will be made to make use of the *Laws* for any further elucidation of the theory of poetry beyond calling attention to those

* Ibid.

† Ibid., p 278.

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passages which deal with the doctrine of rewards and punishments.

In answer to the inquiry, "Is the poet to train his choruses as he pleases, without reference to virtue or vice?" he answers, "That is surely quite unreasonable, and is not to be thought of,"* and cites the example of Egypt which imposed upon its artists in antiquity fixed patterns of art. He accounts for the low standards of poetry prevalent in his day by the fact that the poets sought to please the people, rather than attain those standards of excellence which would be demanded by judges of better taste.† This opinion is somewhat interesting in the light of what Aristotle says in the *Poetics* where he refers to the poetic justice type of tragedy as the result of the efforts of the poets to please the people.‡

A passage of very considerable importance to us in this investigation occurs towards the end of the first half of Book II. in Plato's *Laws*. The doctrine of poetic justice is there set forth in terms of such unmistakable meaning that commentary is scarcely needed. The following is the passage: "Let us see whether we understand one another:—Are not the principles of education and music which prevail among you as follows: you compel your poets to say that the good man, if he be temperate and just, is fortunate and happy; and this whether he be great and strong or small and weak, and whether he be rich or poor; and, on the other hand, if he have a wealth passing that of Cinyras or Midas,

* Ibid., V., p. 34.

† Ibid., p. 37.

‡ *Poetics*, chapter XIII., in Butcher's text, p. 47.

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and be unjust, he is wretched and lives in misery? As the poet says, and with truth: I sing not, I care not about him who accomplishes all noble things, not having justice; . . . if I were a lawgiver I would try to make the poets and all citizens speak in this strain; and I would inflict the heaviest penalties on any one in all the land who should dare to say that there are bad men who lead pleasant lives."*

Here we have the indication of what has been regarded as a somewhat modern idea of poetic justice. In the time of Rymer this doctrine called for the physical punishment of the wrong-doer; in later times critics have been sometimes satisfied if the wrong-doer suffer mentally, while ostensibly enjoying the results of his wickedness,—and this is essentially the kind of poetic justice that Plato had in mind when he insisted that the unjust must be depicted as living in misery. But it is hardly likely that Plato favored the plan of having the wicked escape without punishment in the legal sense. In the ideal commonwealth provision was made for legal punishment of crime, and to such a standard of conduct the action of poetical narrative must naturally conform. Considered from all points of view the language of Plato is sufficiently strong in favor of poetic justice. He will admit of no departure from the practice of rewarding virtue and rendering crime unprofitable. This is a purely ethical requirement, and it has its basis in the idea that society may be harmed or helped by poetical representations. Plato does not deal with the theory of poetic justice, considered from the æsthetic point of view. Such

* Jowett, V., pp. 39-40.

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a view is possible, and such a view was taken by Rymer and others. According to their idea it was necessary not only that the given punishment of a crime be fully adequate to meet the demands of justice for time and eternity, thus satisfying the ethical requirement, but also that the mode of punishment be in itself poetical, thus satisfying the æsthetic requirement of which mention was made. Rymer more than any one else combined these two requirements in his idea of poetic justice. Plato says nothing on the subject directly and very little indirectly. There is no evidence that he thought of combining these two notions in his idea of poetic justice. He is altogether concerned with the ethical aspect of things.

It is true, of course, that the idea of poetic justice which is discovered in the writings of Plato differs in some respects from that which prevailed in the time of Addison. In Plato the doctrine is not treated in the expressly formal manner that made the problem one of peculiar importance at the end of the seventeenth century. It is a fact, for instance, that Plato was more concerned with a discussion of the faults of the poets than with the enunciation of positive rules by which they were to be guided. He condemned poets because of certain errors into which they appeared to have fallen, and he seemed to think that poetry of the ideal type was not to be found. He would expel poets from his ideal commonwealth because he did not regard them as a practically safe guide in the development of the noblest types of citizen. Poetry, as he found it in Greek literature, failed to satisfy

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him from the point of view of ethics; "poetry," he declared, "feeds and waters the passions instead of drying them up; she lets them rule, although they ought to be controlled, if mankind are ever to increase in happiness;"* and, of course, poetry failed to indicate what should be the proper consequences of the actions which were portrayed; and since the poets were not likely to put in practise the ethical requirement he had in mind, he decided to restrict the field of their activity, saying, "we must remain firm in our conviction that hymns to the gods and praises of famous men are the only poetry which ought to be admitted into our state."* His hostility towards the poets is essentially based on an ethical ideal, for he says, "what will any one be profited if under the . . . excitement of poetry, he neglect justice and virtue?"†

That poetry might help the state in a moral way is, nevertheless, a theoretical possibility, provided that they fulfil certain conditions that are described in Book VIII. of his *Laws*. There he requires that the poet should be "not less than fifty years of age; nor should he be one who . . . has never in his life done any noble or illustrious action; but those who are themselves good and also honorable in the state, creators of noble action—let their poems be sung, even though they be not very musical. . . . Nor shall any one dare to sing a song which has not been approved by the judgment of the guardian of the laws . . . but only such poems

* *Rep.* X. 607, in Jowett, III., p. 322.

† *Ibid.*

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

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as . . . are the works of good men, in which praise or blame has been awarded."*

Here, late in life, Plato indicates an acceptable treatment of the deeds of men in poetry, and apparently calls for the application of some principle such as that which goes by the name of poetic justice, and this is the most evident conclusion to be drawn from the reference to 'praise or blame.'

How, it may be asked, would Plato illustrate the idea of 'praise or blame?' To answer this question, one must take note of the methods employed by the guardians of the ideal state in dealing with actions that may be called good or bad. "If the legislator," he says in Book IX. of his *Laws*, sees any one who is incurable, for him he will appoint a law and a penalty. He knows quite well that to such men themselves there is no profit in the continuance of their lives, and that they would do a double good to the rest of mankind if they would take their departure, inasmuch as they would be an example to other men not to offend, and they would relieve the city of bad citizens. In such cases, and in such cases only, the legislator ought to inflict death as the punishment of offences."† Here we have an illustration of the practical relation between crime and punishment; and may we not suppose that the state would require its poets to represent this same relation in any treatment of such a situation? To do so would be to satisfy the ethical purpose of the law of retribution; Plato himself says that the wrong-doer is punished, not

* *Laws* VIII. 829, in Jowett, V. p. 210-211.

† Jowett, V., p. 246.

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"because he did wrong, for that which is done can never be undone, but in order that in future times, he, and those who see him corrected, may utterly hate injustice, or at any rate abate much of their evil doing. Having an eye to all these things, the law, like a good archer, should aim at the right measure of punishment, and in all cases at the deserved punishment."* By portraying human conduct in accordance with the laws of the state, poets would not only produce the proper ethical result, but also conform with the real standards by means of which they might be allowed to practice their art in the ideal commonwealth; so far as any special restraint is concerned, it is merely announced "that the legislator ought not to allow the poets to do what they liked. For that they would not know in which of their words they went against the laws to the hurt of the state."†

It seems clear, then, that Plato would require the poet to represent rewards and punishments in absolute accord with the practise of the legislators of the ideal state, or not at all. Moreover, it is evident that such a representation would be calculated to inspire men to be virtuous and deter them from evil. Furthermore, it appears that the given punishment in any case is regarded as an adequate remedy to prevent men from falling into like error.

Against all this an objection may be raised, based on the fact that to suffer punishment is not a real source of misery to the person guilty of crime, but rather a means of atonement. Certain it is that

* *Laws*, XI., in Jowett, V., p. 323.

† *Laws*, IV., in Jowett, V., p. 102.

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Plato regards it a still greater punishment to let the guilty soul carry into the future life the whole burden of its sins without any chance of retribution in this present state of existence; for he says, "to do wrong is the second only in the scale of evils; but to do wrong and not to be punished, is first and greatest of all;"* and, therefore, it may be contended that if the poet were possessed of the seventeenth century idea of poetic justice, he would employ this method of punishing the guilty. Such a contention is scarcely practical, for the seventeenth century critics were not satisfied with any punishment such as may be supplied by religious theories about the hereafter. Rymer wanted "no hell behind the scenes;" he insisted on full and complete punishment here and now within the limits of the tragic representation, and that is just what Plato wanted in the ideal state. Even though Plato admitted such a punishment to be a blessing in disguise, he nevertheless regarded it as an effective remedy, by example, for the prevention of such disorders. Life for life is one of Plato's doctrines in that part of his work in which he discusses methods of punishment. "These are the retributions of Heaven," he says, "and by such punishments men should be deterred."†

It is clear, therefore, that when a man is put to death for taking away the life of his neighbor, he satisfies the ends of justice in a practical way; and, finally, the poetical representation of such an event not only satisfies the popular sense of justice, thereby producing its proper ethical effect,

* *Gorgias*, in Jowett, II., p. 336.

† *Laws*, IX., in Jowett, V., p. 257.

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but also fulfils the primary condition which the legislator in the ideal state should impose on the writer of the fiction.

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Plato, of course, was not the first to consider instruction as the chief end of poetry. There was a sort of traditional notion that the office of the poet was that of a teacher. Professor Butcher who takes this view of the matter, supports his opinion by several citations from the plays of Aristophanes.* "The other theory," he says, "tacitly no doubt held by many," was first formulated by Aristotle, who held "that poetry is an emotional delight."† He does not admit that Aristotle recognized any direct moral purpose as the primary function of a poet. "Neither in the definition of tragedy (ch. VI. 2), if properly understood," he says, referring to the *Poetics*, "nor in the subsequent discussion of it, is there anything to lend countenance to the view that the office of tragedy is to work upon men's lives, and to make them better. The theatre is not the school. Aristotle's critical judgments on poetry rest on æsthetic and logical grounds, they take no account of ethical aims and tendencies. He mentions Euripides some twenty times in the *Poetics*, and in the great majority of instances with censure. He points out numerous defects such as inartistic structure, bad character-drawing, a wrong part assigned to the chorus; but not a word is there of

* *Frogs* 1009-10; *Acharn.* 500; and elsewhere.

† Butcher, p. 201.

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the immoral influence of which we hear so much in Aristophanes."*

Such an interpretation as this would not suit Rymer or Dennis or others who argued for poetic justice, and based their theory upon Aristotle. They held that the spectator, seeing vice punished, would fear to commit crime, or, seeing virtue rewarded, would resolve to practice virtue. To make their position strong, they held that fear could not be aroused unless the guilty were always punished, and that pity could not be aroused unless this punishment was more severe than legal justice would demand. This process could not be realized in tragedy without of necessity producing a good moral effect in the subsequent conduct of the spectator. Then, too, there was another moral effect resulting from such a spectacle. The frequent exercise of the emotions of pity and fear, rendering them less and less responsive to the stimulus intended to stir them, would so dispose the minds of men that they would not be carried away by pity in such a measure as to hinder the rigor of the law in the punishment of crime. It was along these lines that a defence was made by the most insistent advocates of poetic justice at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth. It was clear to them not only that the primary purpose of tragedy is to produce an ethical effect, but also that such a doctrine is based on the *Poetics* of Aristotle and the practice of the ancient writers of tragedy. Point by point the doctrine was attacked by Addison,—at least with respect to the arguments based upon

* Ibid., pp. 208–209.

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reason and the practice of the ancients; it does not appear, however, that he made any formal denial that Aristotle proposed the doctrine.

Aristotle, as we have seen, was not the first to establish the doctrine of poetic justice. It is not to be asserted, even, that he recommended the doctrine; and yet we must admit that he took note of the idea as referring to a special type of dramatic representation. Just what that special type of dramatic representation is, in comparison with comedy, can be best explained only after quoting Aristotle's own words on the subject; and an explanation is needed to determine, for instance, if Aristotle meant to say that poetic justice is proper to comedy, when as a matter of fact he merely says that a certain tragic pleasure is proper to comedy.

The passage which contains Aristotle's chief reference to the idea of poetic justice and its imaginary relation to comedy is the concluding part of chapter XIII. in the *Poetics*, and is translated as follows by Professor Butcher: "In the second rank comes the kind of tragedy which some place first.* Like the *Odyssey*, it has a double thread of plot, and also an opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad. It is generally thought to be the best owing to the weakness of the spectators; for the poet is guided in what he writes by the wishes of

* As a result of the comparative study of the works of Plato and Aristotle, the writer of this essay is disposed to think that in using the expression, 'which some place first,' the author of the *Poetics* had chiefly in mind the opinions of his distinguished preceptor.

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his audience. The pleasure, however, thence derived is not the true tragic pleasure. It is proper rather to comedy, where those who, in the piece, are the deadliest enemies—like Orestes and Aegisthus—quit the stage as friends at the close, and no one slays or is slain."

It must be admitted that the foregoing passage contains a suggestion of what is meant by poetic justice, the suggestion being found in the reference to an opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad. The meaning of this is, that virtue is rewarded and wickedness is punished. Aristotle notes that such a thing occurs in what is popularly regarded as the best kind of tragedy. His commentary on this species of drama is a very convincing proof, not that the 'opposite catastrophe for the good and for the bad' is proper, but that a catastrophe of this kind produces the same sort of pleasure as that which is proper to comedy. Professor Butcher takes a different view, for he says in reference to this passage that "the prosaic justice, misnamed poetical, which rewards the good man and punishes the wicked, is pronounced to be appropriate only to comedy."* Such a conclusion seems to be unwarranted. According to Aristotle, the catastrophes are not of the same nature. The first of these catastrophes calls for the reward of the good and the punishment of the bad,—therefore, it calls for poetic justice; the termination of a comedy introduces a general reconciliation in which 'no one slays or is slain,' a situation in which there is no opportunity of punishing wrong-doing according to

* *Aristotle's Theory*, p. 209.

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the severe requirements of tragedy. Both endings are pleasing to the spectators, and therefore it is that Aristotle draws a comparison on the grounds of emotional effect.

There can be no complete poetic justice in that sort of comedy which Aristotle had in mind when he made the comparison in question. The idea of poetic justice implies not merely the reward of virtue; it implies also the punishment of vice. Opposed to such a principle of dramatic art is the disposition of plot which would permit the guilty to escape by means of a scheme of reconciliation. Such a thing is not to be allowed. Why? For the simple reason that Mr. Rymer said so, in substance, more than once, as we shall see,—and we are bent on tracing Mr. Rymer's concept of poetic justice to its source. Other critics have had different ideas regarding the nature of poetic justice, and some of them have so defined the expression as to make it win favor with critics who were radically opposed to Rymer. But we are not now concerned with such modification in the meaning of the expression; we are concerned only with what Rymer had in mind, and we have started with the explanation of the subject that was given in the Dennis-Addison controversy.

Aristotle has been misunderstood in this regard. Let us look more closely into the *Poetics* and try to determine whether or not he accepted poetic justice as a legitimate principle of dramatic art under any circumstances whatsoever. Such an investigation will take note of the three types of plays with which Aristotle is most concerned in the

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Poetics. The first of these types is pure tragedy, the second may be called tragi-comedy, the third is pure comedy. We have already given some consideration to two of these types. It remains for us to institute a comparison which will show the interrelation of the three, and the distinctive characteristics of each, in so far as these relations and characteristics will help us to understand Aristotle's theory about poetic justice.

Pure tragedy, according to the *Poetics*, does not involve a reward of virtue; it merely involves an unhappy ending, and must above all things stir the emotions of pity and fear. If it were necessary that the good should be rewarded, we should look for mention of a corresponding emotion, such as joy, and we should expect Aristotle to refer to the ending as both happy and unhappy. But he does not mention other emotions in his definition of tragedy, nor does he make any references to the mingling of happy and unhappy effects in the catastrophe. This means that he did not apply the rule of poetic justice to pure tragedy. From this assertion might be drawn the unwarranted conclusion that Aristotle would permit tragedy to violate the principle of poetic justice. It is not evident that he would permit such a thing to happen. He even goes so far as to say that "the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a perfectly good man brought from prosperity to adversity; for this moves neither pity nor fear; it simply shocks us;"* but that is as far as one can go to prove that Aristotle proposed that tragedy should depict

* Ibid., pp. 41 ff.

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the reward of virtue. The fact of the matter is that he is not in favor of giving any prominence to the merits of virtue; his chief concern is rather in the opposite direction, since the hero, who is to be brought to a pitiable end, must be practically a good man. On this subject Aristotle says that the change in fortune "should come about as a result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty, in a character either such as we have described, or better rather than worse."* The description to which he refers requires that the character must be "that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous,—a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families."†

Again let it be affirmed that Aristotle did not concern himself with the application of any theory of poetic justice. He was not concerned with the question of justice at all—a leading question with Plato—he was concerned only with the means by which the emotions of pity and fear are to be aroused. When he objects to "the spectacle of a perfectly good man brought from prosperity to adversity,"‡ he does so, not because it would offend against justice, but because it shocks. If he had discussed the reasons why we are likely to be shocked, he might have had to introduce the question of justice;

* Ibid., p. 43.

† Ibid., p. 43.

‡ Loc. cit. p. 53.

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but the fact is, that he does not take this opportunity of referring unequivocally to the law of poetry, whose history we are tracing. At best, he unconsciously applies the principle in only a partial manner to the protagonist of the plays; he makes absolutely no attempt to discuss the treatment of the minor characters in reference to the relation existing between their moral qualities and their fate. Rymer and Dennis insisted that the law of poetic justice should be applied to all the characters of the play, and thereby brought their beautiful theory into disrepute. It was discovered that such a rigorous enforcement of the principle was particularly injurious to the reputation which Shakespeare and others had earned, and for this reason the defence attempted to prove that there was no foundation for the "ridiculous doctrine."

Tragi-comedy exhibits, according to Aristotle, a conclusion such as should satisfy the pleader for poetic justice. We have the Greek critic's word for it that this sort of play was classed by some as the highest form of tragedy. What he himself thinks about it, we have already shown. It is quite certain that he does not care to approve of such a form of the drama, for the reason that it produces an emotional effect proper to comedy without possessing the structure of comedy. It is quite proper to repeat here the commentary of Dennis* on the passage of the *Poetics* which is now under consideration. Dennis says: "And does not the same deluded philosopher tell us in the very same chapter that

* Loc. cit. p. 50.

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the fable to which he gives second preference, is that which has a double constitution, and which ends by a double catastrophe. . . Is not here, Mr. Spectator, a very formal recommendation of the impartial and exact execution of poetical justice?" One is tempted to be somewhat flippant in replying to such an arrogantly-put question as this of Mr. Dennis. We shall dismiss the temptation and say simply that the passage to which Mr. Dennis refers contains absolutely no evidence that Aristotle recommended the doctrine of poetic justice. The only suggestion of a recommendation is that which is based upon the approval of the people who encouraged such a feature in plays. This kind of recommendation Aristotle mentions as an historian might, but not for the purpose of approving it. A careful examination of the text will reveal the fact that what Dennis regarded as a recommendation is actually a censure: Aristotle disapproved of those plays which illustrated the theory of poetic justice.

It cannot, then, be fairly maintained that "Aristotle was the first who established this ridiculous doctrine of modern criticism." Such a principle could not be applied to comedy as he understood comedy, nor could it be applied to more than one of the four possible variations of tragedy which he took into consideration. The four possible variations may be listed as follows:

I. A protagonist—neither eminently good nor notably bad—passes from prosperity to adversity.

II. A protagonist—eminently good—passes from prosperity to adversity.

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III. A protagonist—notably bad—passes from adversity to prosperity.*

IV. An exhibition of the good attaining prosperity while the bad are afflicted with adversity.

The first of these represents the only legitimate type of tragedy. The fourth is tolerated, not for the sake of art, but only out of respect for the taste of the people; but it is not recommended. The other two are wholly rejected.

One more argument is to be advanced to show that Aristotle is not the proper basis for the seventeenth century idea of poetic justice. In deciding what is proper for tragedy he makes this assertion: "Nor, again, should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would, doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear; for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, fear by the misfortune of a man like ourselves."† Hence it was not a question of justice; the villain might be punished so as to satisfy the moral sense, says Aristotle, and yet he would not do for tragedy. Rymer would insist on such a refinement of

* Butcher observes that whereas Aristotle is to be approved for rejecting this type of tragedy, it is hardly so certain that he is to be praised for rejecting the second in the list here given. "The unqualified rejection of such a theme as unsuited to tragedy may well surprise us. Aristotle had not to go beyond the Greek stage to find a guiltless heroine whose death does not shock the moral sense. Nothing but a misplaced ingenuity or a resolve at all costs to impart a moral lesson into the drama, can discover in *Antigone* any fault or failing which entailed on her suffering as its due penalty."—*Aristotle's Theory*, p. 287.

† *Ibid.*, p. 43.

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the moral sense that it would not be satisfied by any punishment which, for instance, Shakespeare might inflict upon Richard III. Aristotle did not think of villainy for which there was no adequate punishment, and yet he would refuse to accept for the office of protagonist any notably bad character. Rymer would admit the sinner only on condition that the punishment inflicted should satisfy an over-refined moral sense. In this respect, therefore, Aristotle is not to be called the author of the seventeenth century idea of poetic justice.

It will be remembered that reference was made to the fact that Rymer insisted upon certain æsthetical conditions in connection with the ethical requirement.* In this he was following Aristotle, who points out certain circumstances that "impress us as terrible or pitiful."† Here, for example, is a passage of which Rymer made considerable use in *The Tragedies of the Last Age*. "If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or the intention,—except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful. So again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another—if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother, or any other deed of the kind, is done—here we have the situation which should be sought for by the poet."‡ The effect which such circumstances would produce may be properly described as æsthetic;

* Loc. cit. p. 43.

† *Aristotle's Theory*, p. 47.

‡ Ibid.

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in fact, the whole burden of the *Poetics* is largely one of æsthetics. The only exception to this rule is found in the clause which refers to the *kartharsis* of the emotions of pity and fear. In this particular passage we have reason to think that Aristotle intended an ethical effect; and such a conclusion must be maintained if we are to admit, with Finsler, "that the doctrine of the *kartharsis* is an answer to the rejection of tragedy by Plato."*

It must be observed, however, that the ethical effect-intended by Aristotle was not the same as that which was thought of by many notable literary critics of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, who supposed that tragedy should have the ethical function of making men better through the effect of example. Aristotle did not intend to show how men might become better by witnessing the portrayal of the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice; what he did intend to show was that men might be made courageous in the face of terrifying dangers as a result of having witnessed terrifying spectacles so frequently that the emotions would not be aroused by means of the ordinary stimulus. This interpretation of the famous 'pity and fear' clause of the *Poetics* is somewhat radical, but not

* "Dass die Lehre von der Katharsis eine Antwort auf die Verwerfung der Tragödie durch Platon sei, bezweifelt heute im Grunde niemand mehr. Der Streit dreht sich nur darum, ob des Aristoteles Antwort laute: "Die Tragödie ist nicht zu verbannen, denn sie darf nur nach ihrer æsthetischen Wirkung betrachtet werden." oder: "Der Tragödie ist beizubehalten, weil sie auch ethisch berechtigt ist,"—*Platon und die Aristotelische Poetik von George Finsler*, p. 120.

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without the implied support of a recent writer on the subject. Finsler thinks that "the katharsis is not an æsthetic but essentially an ethical process" and that "it has to serve the best interests of the state in the same way as education or recreation."*

But the position taken by those who defended the principle of poetic justice, and ascribed its origin to Aristotle, made it necessary for them to search the *Poetics* for every passage that might be so construed as to serve their purpose. So the attempt was made to show that Aristotle intended no pleasurable effect as the chief end of tragedy, but rather the moral effect that would result from the portrayal of the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice. It is quite certain that Aristotle was far from intending any effect of the kind. To maintain that Aristotle intended this moral effect would be the same as implying that he was guilty of an inconsistency.

How, it will be asked, can it be shown that Aristotle did not intend this kind of ethical effect when he speaks of the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear? The answer to such a question is not difficult. Certain it is that the chief end of tragedy

* "Wenn nun Mitleid und Furcht krankhafte Affektionen der Seele sind, so wird durch die Katharsis der normale Zustand der Seele wieder hergestellt; diese gewinnt dadurch ihr Gleichgewicht, oder, wie Aristoteles sagt, ihre Tugend wieder. Es ist aber der Mensch nur durch diese im Stande, das Ziel alles Lebens, die Glückseligkeit, zu erreichen, und nur wer das fuer sich kann, ist auch ein nuetzliches Glied des Staates. Also ist die Katharsis kein æsthetischer, sondern ein ganz wesentlicher ethischer Prozess; sie hat dem Ziel des besten Staates zu dienen, wie die Erziehung und die Erholung; darum ist sie auch in der Politik und nicht in der Poetik ausfuehrlich eroertert,"—Ibid, p. 122.

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is designated by that part of Aristotle's definition which reads as follows: "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."* Now, the above-mentioned moral effect will be accomplished by showing that virtue is rewarded and that vice is punished. If such a spectacle be the means by which this chief end of tragedy is to be attained, how does it happen that Aristotle describes such a spectacle as characteristic of second-rate tragedy, emphasizing his censure by saying that from such a spectacle the true pleasure can not be derive , and blaming "the weakness of the spectators" for any popularity which such shows achieve?† I can see here nothing but inconsistency. Nor can I overlook the fact that Aristotle himself rejects the poetic justice type of tragedy not for any ethical reasons, but solely for the reason that it does not produce "the true tragic pleasure."‡

It is possible to arrive at the same general conclusion by means of an entirely different kind of argument. Plato, it will be remembered, was wholly concerned with the ethical function of poetry; he thought not only that poets ought to represent the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, but that they should have no alternative; he rejected entirely the type of tragedy that Aristotle afterward favored, and proposed the type which Aristotle rejected for the reason that it did not produce tragic pleasure; moreover,—and this is important—he objected to any spectacle that should arouse in men

* *Aristotle's Theory*, p. 23.

† *Ibid.*, p. 45.

‡ *Ibid.*

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the emotions of pity and fear, contrary to the proposal of his pupil who held that they should be aroused. Here we have a distinct opposition of views.

The most remarkable point of difference is that which concerns the emotions of pity and fear. It seems strange that the parallel of difference should exist up to this point and then come to a sudden stop without any explanation. Plato objected to the agitation of the emotions of pity and fear, saying that the cultivation and intensifying of these emotions will make men cowards. Aristotle argued in favor of the agitation of these same emotions—for what reason? For the very same reason that Plato gave,—to reduce the violence of these emotions, to bring them to a state of ideal healthfulness, that men might not give way to excessive fear in the face of danger or to undue pity when witnessing the misfortunes of other men. Since Aristotle had the same end in view as Plato, he regarded the parallel of differences brought to an end that needed no apology. Plato wanted the emotions of pity and fear to be kept under perfect control and therefore he would expunge entirely from the works of poets all passages that should awaken such emotions. Aristotle seemed to hope for the accomplishment of the same ultimate effect by the purgation method of arousing these emotions in order that their hurtfulness might be purged from the system.

We are not arguing here for a right conception of the true end of poetry; we are merely attempting to understand what was Aristotle's idea of poetry. It is entirely beyond the bounds of reason to think that he entered upon the discussion of the effects

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of a tragic spectacle upon the emotions of pity and fear without intending to throw new light upon a problem to which Plato gave such serious consideration in his *Republic*. If he intended to agree with Plato that these emotions should be rendered less hurtful in their effects upon the soul, he could have chosen no better word than the one he used, for katharsis means purgation in the medical sense, metaphorically, just as the adjective cathartic is used in English as an equivalent of the word purgative. If Aristotle did not intend that this should be the meaning of the word, the fact itself would be scarcely credible, even though it were supported by evidence far more weighty than has been yet produced by the most ardent supporters of the doctrine of poetic justice. Here, then, in conclusion, it may be asserted in a positive manner that Aristotle did not recommend the doctrine of poetic justice, and that the chief end of poetry, according to Aristotle, was ethical, not in the sense which corresponds to the idea of poetic justice, but rather in the sense which supposes that the Aristotelian purgation of the emotions of pity and fear would strengthen in men the qualities of the soldier, and not make cowards of them, as Plato thought.

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CHAPTER II

English Basis of Poetic Justice

AN ERRONEOUS ASSERTION CONCERNING RYMER.

THE very definite form which was taken by the Dennis-Addison controversy regarding poetic justice makes it clear that there were two questions at issue. The preceding chapter has disposed of one of these questions in the discussion of the statement made by Dennis when he said that "Aristotle was the first who established this ridiculous doctrine of modern criticism." The second question has its origin in the remaining part of the passage just quoted, for Dennis goes on to say, "but Mr. Rymer was the first who introduced it into our native language; who notwithstanding the rage of all the poetasters of the times, whom he has exasperated by opening the eyes of the blind that they may see their errors, will always pass with impartial posterity for a most learned, a most judicious, and a most useful critic."* Here, again, it is to be observed that Addison offered no objection to the declaration of Dennis in regard to Rymer's introduction of the doctrine into English literary criticism. Furthermore, it is to be noted that the truth of the proposition has been accepted by all those who have passed judgment upon the matter. Even so dis-

* Dennis, *To the Spectator*, p. 42, published with *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare*.

AN ERRONEOUS ASSERTION

tinguished a writer as Professor Lounsbury, of Yale, has thought fit to make the following assertion in his work entitled *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*: "So far as I know, Rymer was the one who introduced into English criticism the doctrine of poetic justice, though playwrights had previously not neglected to conform to it in practice. Certainly he was the first to give it vogue."* Professor Lounsbury is evidently disposed to accept what Dennis said in regard to the question, in the same sense and almost in the same form of expression. A comparison of the words of the two writers will show to what extent the opponent of Addison is less discerning than the Yale professor. Both seem to regard the origin of the doctrine as something distinct from its position in English literary criticism: Dennis is positive on this point; Lounsbury is so by inference, since he refers to it as a doctrine that has been introduced. Dennis goes no farther, except as may be seen elsewhere in his writings, to show how thoroughly erroneous were the current theories of tragic poets when put in practice; Lounsbury admits that playwrights had actually conformed to the rule.

Certain it is, as Lounsbury asserted, that Rymer was the first to give vogue to the doctrine of poetic justice. It is not so certain, however, that Rymer was the first to introduce the idea into English literary criticism. To be the author of the English expression, "poetical justice,"† and to apply it to a special principle of dramatic art, is one thing; to recognize

* *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, pp. 401-402.

† This is the phrase as first used by Rymer.

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that principle under any form of expression whatsoever, and to apply it to the drama as a law of criticism, is a different thing altogether. Rymer gave the principle a fixed form of expression and used it as the basis of a large portion of his work in literary criticism, but he was not the first English writer to apply the principle to the discussion of plays.

As early as the year 1543 the doctrine of poetic justice was recognized by an act of parliament in which it would seem that only those plays were to be approved which set forth the punishment of the wicked and the reward of the good. In 1575 this same principle of dramatic art was exhibited designedly in George Gascoigne's play called *The Glass off Government*. In 1578 the same thing was done in the case of George Whetstone's *Promos and Cassandra*, and about the same time by Stephen Gosson in his unpublished *Catiline*. Sir Philip Sidney did not fail to make note of the principle in his *Apologie of Poetry* which was written as early as 1583. Less explicit, but based on the same theory of the function of the drama, was the opinion of Richard Puttenham as set forth in his *Arte of English Poesie* in 1589. Francis Bacon's *Essay on the Advancement of Learning*, published in 1605, contains a passage which Worsfold has taken to be an enunciation of the doctrine of poetic justice; and Richard Fleckno's *Short Discourse of the English Stage*, published in 1664, seems to regard it the chief business of a play to be a practical illustration of this dramatic law.

These are the leading authorities that may be

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cited in support of the proposition that Rymer was not the first to introduce the "ridiculous doctrine" into English criticism. The references have not been localized in the foregoing summary, for the reason that a detailed examination is to be made covering the whole field of early English literature in chronological order. The sources of argument are somewhat diversified, embracing not only a particular discussion of what may be called pure literary criticism, but also consideration of certain legal enactments that dealt with plays and players, as well as a variety of popular agitation concerning the same subject.

RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL RESTRAINT OF THE DRAMA.

The earliest limits for an investigation of this kind need not ante-date the twelfth century. Plays of a religious kind were acted in England as early as the year 1119, and probably before that time, but the language used was French. It was not until the year 1328 that miracle plays were first performed in English.* It is not to be expected, therefore, that pre-Chaucerian English will present much commentary on dramatic art. Nevertheless, this is not to be regarded as a special characteristic of English literature. Collier remarks that in this respect we are ahead of the other countries of Europe. His monumental work on the drama contains a reference to this fact in the following words: "No country of Europe, since the revival of letters, has been able to produce any notice of theatrical performances

* Collier, *History of English Dramatic Poetry*, I., p. 12, note.

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of so early a date as England."* The notice upon which Collier bases his assertion is taken from Stowe's *Survey of London*. In that work Stowe quotes from William Fitzstephen's *Vita Sancti Thomæ Archiepiscopi et Martyris* a passage which is done into English as follows: "London for the shewes upon theatres, and comical pastimes, hath holy playes, representations of miracles, which holy confessors have wrought; or representations of tormentes, wherein the constancie of martirs appeared."† These holy plays, referred to, were presented in London between 1170 and 1182, a conclusion that Collier draws from the fact that it was about that time that Fitzstephen produced his life of St. Thomas. It is proper, therefore, to take this as our starting point in determining how it was that the doctrine of poetic justice became a principle of dramatic art in English literary criticism.

It is hardly necessary to observe that the doctrine of poetic justice developed through a consideration of the ethical function of the drama. It is true that, theoretically speaking, this development could take place in another way. We know that critics have held different views regarding the meaning

* Ibid., I., p. 1. "It is known," says Collier (I., p. 3), "that prior to 1119, the miracle-play of St. Katherine had been represented at Dunstable," but elsewhere he says (I., 5), referring to the middle of the thirteenth century, that "the miracle-play of St. Katherine and other dramatic representations, founded upon the lives of the saints, and upon the events of the old and new testaments, were in French."

† Ibid., I., p. 2, note.

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of the phrase in which Aristotle used the word *katharsis*. According to one interpretation the emotions of pity and fear must be produced in the mind of the spectator for the purpose of making him avoid in his own conduct the errors that are exhibited in the spectacle before him. According to another interpretation these same emotions must be produced in his mind in order that he may become less susceptible to their harmful effects. The first of these interpretations implies that the drama is to have an ethical function, inasmuch as it will teach men to be better, the second interpretation implies that the drama is to have an æsthetical function, inasmuch as it creates in the mind of the spectator during the presentation of the drama a temporary agitation for the purpose of making the mind strong to withstand the worries and anxieties of real life. According to one theory, the drama teaches men to be good; according to the other, it prepares them to get more pleasure out of life. In one case the drama is to operate chiefly on the will; in the other case it is to operate chiefly on the emotions. Teach, says one school of interpreters; please, says the other.*

But in order to accomplish the end proposed, whether it be to instruct or to please, both schools of interpreters may hold that the emotions of pity and fear are to be aroused; and, furthermore, they may hold that these emotions cannot be aroused

* The second of these theories may also point to an ethical effect, as we have already observed. See pp. 59 ff.

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when the dramatist neglects the law of poetic justice. It may be argued, for example, that inasmuch as the protagonist is excessively malicious in his criminal acts, he can not be punished severely enough in the play to make us pity him or to make us fear the consequences of such acts; and from these premises one school of thought, may draw the conclusion that the spectacle will not tend to make man morally better, while the other school emphasizes the fact that since the emotions of pity and fear are not exercised, the pleasurable effect will not be produced.

Now it happens that early English thought on the subject was more concerned with the question of the ethics of the drama than with any other considerations. The reason for this is that not only in England but also in all European countries where the drama flourished, there was from the beginning an instinctive opposition to any dramatic spectacle that might have a hurtful effect upon the morals of men. Plato had found fault with poetry for the evils which it might produce; the Fathers of the Church had recognized its possibilities for evil; and the Church of the middle ages had discouraged very effectively the writing or acting of objectionable plays. In consequence of this, we are not surprised to observe that the revival of the drama, wherever the influence of the Church has to be taken into consideration, showed a development along religious lines. Moralities, miracle-plays, and the like, were not only tolerated but also encouraged by the very spirit which had done so much to retard the growth of the classical drama. Only in so far as the drama had a good moral effect, was it at all tolerated during

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the middle ages; and it was under this kind of censorship that it began its career in England. Whatever might have been the effect of a philosophical argument in favor of the æsthetical function of the drama, it was of such little importance that we find scarcely any evidence of such an argument in early English criticism.

Let us turn back now to Collier's quotation from Fitzstephen. There is little to be gathered from the passage except an inference regarding the ethical character of the drama when it was first introduced into England. As yet there was no development such as is hinted at in the reference to "shews upon theatres and comical pastimes."* Fitzstephen had described the condition of Rome with respect to the drama; and now he is making a comparison, in which, of course, it appears that the business of the drama in England was to instruct, whereas the tendency in Rome was probably in an opposite direction.

It might be thought that such theatrical representations as those which Fitzstephen called "holy plays," would be received with universal approval so far as moral considerations were involved; but such was not the case. Collier, in his *History of English Dramatic Poetry*, says: "The clergy do not seem to have been unanimous as to the propriety and policy of public dramatic performances; and we find a violent attack upon them in the *Manuel de Peche*, an Anglo-French poem written about the middle of the thirteenth century."† A summary of the attack would show that while it was proper to have miracle

* Loc. cit. p. 68.

† I., pp. 5 ff.

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plays of the resurrection or birth of Christ presented only in churches, public performances on highways or greens were not to be approved of, for the reason that such exhibitions were sinful. In the year 1378 King Richard II. received a petition from the choristers of St. Paul's Cathedral, asking for an order restraining certain players from acting "the History of the Old Testament," their reason being that the clergy of St. Paul's had gone to considerable expense in preparation for an exhibition of the kind at Christmas time. This, of course, was a mere matter of business, but it is mentioned as indicating one step in the development of government censorship of the drama in England, for it is probable that the request was granted by Richard II.

One of the earliest suggestions of the bad moral effect of the drama in England is to be found in a short poem that appears in the *Harleian Collection*. In form, it is a mixture of Latin and English; in substance, it refers to the dissolute manners of the time of Henry VI., and may therefore be assigned to the middle of the fifteenth century. The poem shows that the performance of plays, especially on Sundays, was then so frequent as to be considered by the writer a crying evil. The author says:

"Ingland goeth to noughte, plus fecit homo viciosus,
To lust man is brought, nimis est homo deliciosus;
Goddis halidays non observantur honeste,
For unthrifty pleyis in eis regnant manifeste."*

More than a hundred years elapsed, however, before there was any very formal attack made on the drama in England because of its immorality.

* Ibid., I., p. 25

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Such an attack was made by Roger Ascham about the year 1570 in a book called *The Schoolmaster*. He complained bitterly against the influence of certain translations from the Italian. He observed that they smacked of immorality, and he declared that they had been introduced by "the subtle and secrete papistes at home."* He took a fling at the character of English literature as it was before the time of the Reformation, and again characterized it as offensive in the same way. The Arthurian legends are particularly objectionable on the score of immorality, he says, "yet ten Morte Arthures do not the tenth part so much harme as one of these bookes made in Italie and translated in England."† Ascham was, of course, a Puritan; but, according to Smith, he was "the least bigoted in his Puritan sympathies."‡ His chief distinction is this, that he was one of the very first to enter the field of English literary criticism.

The Puritan spirit, which found expression in the writings of Roger Ascham, was largely responsible for the subsequent development of literary criticism in England. Ascham was not the only exponent of that spirit; nevertheless, he was in some respects the most distinguished. Few of those who came after him achieved any noteworthy success in giving literary form and expression to the doctrines of Puritanism. The story of their opposition to literary art is read not so much in what they themselves wrote, as in the works of the Defenders. "They denounce Poetry," says Smith, "because it is a

* Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, I., p. 3.

† Ibid., I., p. 4.

‡ Ibid., p. xviii.

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school of abuse—their argument is social, political, personal. Their importance—and it should not be under-estimated—lies in the fact that they called forth a reasoned defense, and compelled their opponents to examine the principles of Poetry.”*

Puritanism was only one of the influences against which literature, and the drama in particular, had to contend. Two other religious influences were to be taken into consideration; namely: Protestantism and the Church of Rome. To some extent, these three influences were also associated with a sort of political influence. There was, for instance, a certain amount of Puritan influence brought to bear upon the government for the purpose of establishing a strict legal censorship of the drama; in that way Puritanism intensified the political restrictions to which plays and players were subjected. Then, too, Puritanism stood for certain religious principles, the conservation of which was imperilled by such theatrical performances as satisfied the taste of pleasure-seekers.

Protestantism also, in its simplest form, contributed its share to the consorship of the stage. After the Reformation was well established in England, a strict watch was kept on the drama in order to take note of any representations that might be helpful to the cause of the papacy in its struggle to regain what was lost; in consequence of this, the law was invoked for the purpose of prohibiting such performances. But Protestantism did not make its attack quite so sweeping as Puritanism did. The latter attacked the drama on both

* Ibid., I., p. xiv.

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moral and historical grounds, as well as on grounds purely sectarian; the former based its attack on sectarian grounds chiefly, and only on moral grounds incidentally. At any rate, it is customary to attribute to Puritanism all the extreme rigorism of the attack in so far as it looked to the morality of the stage, and much of the argument which was derived from the anti-stage spirit of the middle ages. This argument from history was acceptable to Puritans even though the Fathers of the Church were to be cited as authorities. "So, too," says Smith, "it turned to classical literature, and confounded the scholars and lovers of vain things with the dicta of Aristotle, or of Plato the accredited expeller of poets from the ideal commonwealth."* Smith also observes that, "The attack was, however, keener on the side of morality, and it was led in two directions—against the playhouse and its associations, and against the foreign, especially the Italian, influences in society."†

Sectarian opposition in the form of Protestantism was balanced by a similar activity on the part of those who adhered to the Church of Rome, each in its own time and place. No sooner had the Reformation started in Europe than the stage began to be used as a means of popularizing the new doctrine. Such a movement was, of course, checked effectively wherever the Catholic clergy had any power to do so. An illustration of this is to be found in a letter written by Thomas Wylley to the Lord Privy Seal of England about a year after Henry VIII. broke away from the Church of Rome. The letter complains, says Collier, "that the priests . . . would not allow

* Ibid., I., p. xvi.

† Ibid.

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him to preach in their churches because he had made a play against the Pope's counsellors . . . he also mentions in it several other dramatic performances of a religious character, of which he was the author, or which he was then composing."* About eight years after this an act of Parliament, dated 1543, put an effectual stop to all plays that might be injurious to the Church of Rome. That the enactment should be favorable to the Church of Rome is very strange in view of the fact that it was published in the same year in which Henry married his last wife, Catherine Parr. It shows how unsettled was the state of religion at the time. Six years later, by an act of Edward VI., there was a general prohibition of plays. In 1553 there was another legal enactment which held the drama in check. Queen Mary, a Catholic, was on the throne. In "A Proclamation for reformation of busy meddlers in matters of Religion, and for redresse of Prechars, Prynters, and players," she took means to prevent the ridicule of Roman Catholics and their doctrines, by forbidding the printing or enactment of plays without license.† This enactment brought about such a severe censorship of the stage that there are no dramas extant "which, so far as can be ascertained," says Collier, "were printed during the reign of Mary."‡

Such was the religious agitation in regard to the stage. It involved, as we have seen, certain legal enactments, such as those of 1543 and 1553, which were favorable to Roman Catholics. In the

* Ibid., I., p. 130.

† Ibid., I., pp. 157-158.

‡ Ibid., I., p. 176.

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reign of Elizabeth there were other enactments, one in 1559, and another in 1574. These, however, were not all concerned with the religious aspect of the drama. They were rather concerned with the very life of dramatic art itself and took into consideration the attitude of Puritans, rather than that of the Roman Catholics. It was about this time, as we have seen, that Puritanism found a defender in the person of Roger Ascham. His *Schoolmaster* was published four years before any actor in England had received a national permit to practice his profession. This brings us to a special consideration of early English law in so far as it had a bearing upon the acting of plays.

It is worth while noting what was the standing which the actor had before the law, and, in particular, what were the punishments which might be inflicted upon him. For violating the act of Parliament of 1543 the player was to be fined ten pounds and imprisoned three months for the first offence; for the second offence he was to forfeit all his goods and be subjected to perpetual imprisonment.* "A Proclamation for the inhibition of Players," issued in 1549, contained a provision for "imprisonment, and further punishment at the pleasure of his Majestie."† This inhibition becoming ineffective by the beginning of the year 1552, as appears from the fact that players and printers took excessive liberties with the drama, a Proclamation was issued that year requiring players to have a license for theatrical performances, and printers a license for their publications, under penalty of "imprisonment,

* I., pp. 128 ff.

† Ibid., I., p. 143.

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without bayle or mayneprice, and further fine at his Majesties pleasor."* The Proclamation issued by Queen Mary in 1553 was the same in effect, though for a somewhat different purpose. The punishment, however, was less specific; it was only indicated by saying that the offender would "incurre her highnesse indignation, and displeasure."† In 1559 Queen Elizabeth issued a proclamation of dramatic censorship which gave "all manner of officers" authority to arrest and imprison the offenders" for the space of fourteene dayes or more, as cause shall nede.—And further also untill good assurance may be founde and gyven, that they shalbe of good behaviour, and no more offende in the like."‡

In spite of the fact that a national permit was given to certain players in 1574, the city of London maintained a hostile attitude toward the drama, as may be seen from the following passage in a proclamation issued by the city council in 1575: "Be yt enacted by the Authoritie of this Comen Counsell, that from henceforth no play, comodye, tragedie, interlude, nor publycke shewe shalbe openlye played or shewed within the liberties of the Cittie, whearin shalbe uttered anie wourdes, examples, or doynges of any unchastitie, sedicion, nor such lyke unfytt, and uncomelye matter, uppon paine of imprisonment by the space of XIII^{ten} daies of all psons offending in anie such open playenge, or shewinges."|| The enactment from which this passage is taken was directly the cause why James Burbage built his

* Ibid., I., p. 148.

† Ibid., I., p. 150.

‡ Ibid., I., p. 169.

|| Ibid., I., pp. 215-216.

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Theatre, just outside the limits of the city administration.

The list of sixteenth century enactments against the drama in England would not approach completeness if mention were not made of one which was published in 1572, two years before Elizabeth issued the royal patent already referred to. This royal enactment of 1572 is particularly noteworthy because it shows to what extremes the law did go in its censorship of the stage. I do not find that this law is mentioned by Collier, who is fairly complete in his treatment of the question. The passage to which I wish to refer is summarised in the Arber Reprints, in the Editor's Introduction to Gosson's *School of Abuse*. Reference is there made to an Act of Parliament of 1572, "which declared, among others all Fencers, Bearwardes, Comon Players in Enterludes and Minstrels, if not belonging to any Baron of this Realme or towards any other honorable Personage of greater Degree to be Roges, Vacabounds and Sturdye Beggars: and, as such, provided for them, whether male of female, as follows:--On first conviction to bee grevouslye whipped, and burnte through the gristle of the right eare with a hot yron of the compasse of an ynche about, manifestinge his or her rogyshe kinde of Lyfe. . A second offence was adjudged felony. A third offence entayled death without benefit of clergy or sanctuary."* This act of legislation occurred in the period when Puritanism was most active in its attack upon the drama. The immediate result of such activity was

* Arber Reprints, Introduction to Gosson's *School of Abuse*, p. 7-8.

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to bring defenders to the rescue. A less immediate result was seen more than half a century later in the total suppression of the theatre when Puritanism gained the upper hand in politics. The ultimate result was, however, one which contributed somewhat to the development of the idea of poetic justice, for the reason that the defenders felt they could best accomplish their purpose by proving that poetry has an ethical value. In their attempt to prove this proposition they had to show in what way the ethical element operates in poetry; and this, again, meant a discussion of the application of the law of morality to the conduct of the characters reproduced on the stage.

The story of the opposition which the drama had to contend with in England, prior to the time when the Burbage's Theatre was established outside of the city limits of London, has been told in a condensed form for the purpose of showing that it was far more necessary for the defenders to justify the drama on the grounds of morality than to show that its chief end was to please. The opponents of the drama held to the principle that the drama must have a good moral effect, otherwise it is to be prohibited. They held, also, that as a rule the drama produced the contrary effect, and for this reason their sympathies were entirely against the drama. Some of the defenders of poetry accepted the judgments which were made by the opposition, but not their sympathies. They admitted that poetry should not run riot, they said that it should conform to certain laws, and they explained the operation of the laws which they proposed. Poetry is morally

PURITAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS PLAYS

bad, said the extreme Puritan; therefore, let us have no more of it. Poetry is sometimes morally bad, admitted the Defender; let us instruct the poets how to produce the desired moral effect without doing away entirely with the æsthetic qualities; let us have poetry, but let it be the right kind.

THE EARLY PURITAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS PLAYS.

English literary criticism, then, was concerned with the ethics of the drama as soon as there was anything that might be called English literary criticism. The first English writer to whom we can at all refer for a critical opinion on the ethical function of the drama is not Roger Ascham, because he does not deal with the question constructively, nor any one before him, since English literary criticism begins with him. Ascham, in a work of his published in 1570* touched the question of ethics in literature only as a Puritan would, except that he showed more regard for the classic poets than would be expected from a rabid Puritan; Gascoigne who followed him chronologically was chiefly concerned with questions of meter and rhythm in the most important of his critical works, "Certayne Notes of Instruction."

But George Gascoigne is to be mentioned for something more than his critical opinions on the making of verse. He was the first English critic to apply to the drama in a formal and expressly intentional way the idea of rewarding virtue and punishing vice. It is not to be said, however, that

* This was two years after his death.

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the result of his effort was so remarkable for its success as to encourage others to follow his example. The play in question was called *The Glasse off Government, a tragicall comedie*, and it appears that his reason for calling the play a "tragicall comedie" was, as he himself says, "because therein are handled as well the reward for virtues as also the punishment for vices."*. Collier gives a summary of the argument of the play in his *History of Dramatic Poetry*. He calls it a most tedious puritanical treatise upon education, illustrated by the different talents and propensities of four young men placed under the same master: the two cleverest are seduced to vice, whilst the two dullest persevere in a course of virtue, and one of them becomes secretary to the Landgrave, and the other a famous preacher."† It is not necessary to analyse the play to show that virtue is rewarded,—the reason why Gascoigne calls the play 'comedie;' nor shall we try to show that vice is punished,—the reason why he describes the play as 'tragicall.' It is sufficient that he regarded such a treatment of his characters as worthy of being commented upon. He did not make it a rule for himself in all cases nor is there any thing to indicate that he would impose the rule upon others. We are probably safe, however, in taking it for granted that he regarded it the peculiar function of 'tragicall comedie' to reward virtue and to punish vice. If this be true, he regarded the doctrine of poetic justice as a proper characteristic of 'tragicall comedie.' Rymer held it to be an essential characteristic of tragedy, properly so called, and erroneously judged

* Collier, III., p. 7, note.

† Ibid.

PURITAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS PLAYS

that in this opinion he was supported by Aristotle.

The third notable contributor to the beginnings of English Criticism was George Whetstone, who published in 1578 a play entitled *The right excellent and famous Historye of Promos and Cassandra devided into two Comicall discourses*. In the Dedication of these two comedies he says: "The effects of the both are good and bad; virtue intermixed with vice, unlawful desyres (if it were possible) quencht with chaste denyals—all needeful actions (I thinke) for public vewe. For by the rewarde of the good the good are encouraged in wel doinge—and with the scourge of the lewde the lewde are feared from evill attempts: mainetayning this my opinion with Platoes auctority. Nawghtinesse commes of the corruption of nature, and not by readinge or hearinge the lives of good or lewde (for such publication is necessary), but goodnesse (sayth he) is beawtified by either action."*

Here we have a clear indication that Whetstone has a fairly good knowledge of what is meant by the doctrine of poetic justice. He has constructed a play with a moral lesson based upon the principle that the good should be rewarded and the wicked should be punished. This, of course, is the essence of poetic justice. He even states the very argument which was advanced by Rymer a century later, for he points to the fact that the good are encouraged in well doing when they see that the virtuous are rewarded, and the wicked are made to fear the

* Smith, I., p. 59. This passage should have been considered by Dennis before he ascribed to Aristotle the Greek origin of poetic justice.

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doing of evil when they see the wicked punished. Rymer, it is true, would give us a deeper analysis of the question. He might even tell us that Whetstone did not observe the principle of poetic justice in the play, as may be easily proved. Such is, in a measure, the case,—a fact not to be wondered at, since *Promos and Cassandra* is a comedy. In so far, however, as it was possible in that part of the play which preceded the happy ending, the action pointed to a catastrophe in which the chief offender was to suffer death for his crime, for having put the heroine's brother to death. The happy ending is evolved from the fact that the crime was not really committed, and the chief offender is saved not only on this account but because mercy is asked for him by those whom he sought to injure. The intention of the poet to reward virtue is made clear not only in the Dedication, but also in the text of the play. In the closing scene the King says:

"Cassandra, I have noted thy distresse,
Thy vertues eke, from first unto the last;
And glad I am, without offence it lyes
In me to ease thy grieve and heavines.
Andrugio sav'd the juel of thy joye,
And for thy sake I pardon Promos faulte:
Yea let them both thy virtues rare commende,
In that their woes with this delight doth ende."

(Part II., Act V., Scene IV.)*

The story used in this play is the same as that which Shakespeare used as a basis for his *Measure for Measure*. Shakespeare, of course, improved on the work of Whetstone. Rymer's important disquisition on poetic justice was published just one

* *Six Old Plays*, I., p. 107.

PURITAN ATTITUDE TOWARDS PLAYS

hundred years after Whetstone made a practical application of the same principle in the comedy which we have just discussed. It can be reasonably supposed that if he had given the play a tragic ending he would have still adhered to the same principle. As it was, he observed the principle as faithfully as possible up to the point where the happy ending was introduced.

No argument can be drawn directly from the works of Gascoigne or Whetstone, taken separately, to show that these writers thought the principle of poetic justice should be applied to all dramatic forms. If, however, we consider one in the light of the other, we shall observe that both seem to favor a treatment of plot which will illustrate the principle, whether the play be pure comedy or tragi-comedy. Furthermore, it is significant that both call attention to the fact that a principle of this kind has been applied. But we are not to consider these plays either separately or merely in relation to each other. We must take account of the external influences which were then at work. Puritanism was the most prominent of these influences, and just at this time it found expression in a sermon delivered at St. Paul's and in a book called the *School of Abuse*. On the third Sunday of November, 1577, the preacher at "Pawles Crosse" delivered a bitter harangue against theatrical spectacles, in which it was argued that "the cause of sinne are playes."* In the year 1579 the same argument was advanced by Gosson in his *School of Abuse*. He charges the theatre with being a meeting place for persons inclined to lewd

* Arber Reprints, *Gosson*, p. 8.

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conduct,* and attacks also the character of the drama itself, saying of the players, "They seek not to hurt, but desire too please—they have purged their comedyes of wanton speeches, yet the Corne they sell is full of Cockle."† More to our purpose, however, was his apology for a play that he himself had written: "The whole mark I shot at in the woorke," he says, "was to show the rewarde of traytors in Catilin, and the necessary government of learned men in the person of Cicero."‡ To what extent the play might be a representation not only of the punishment of crime but also of the reward of virtue we are unable to say, since the play to which he refers was never printed.§ It was called *Catiline's Conspiracies*. It seems evident, however, that Catiline was punished for his treason, and we can imagine that the virtuous Cicero was rewarded for his patriotism. Such a conclusion can easily be drawn from Gosson's own words. We can also draw the conclusion that the play was, properly speaking, a tragedy.

Combining now the results of our examination of the works of Gascoigne, Whetstone, and Gosson, we find that not only was an attempt made to represent the reward of virtue and the punishment of crime in tragedy, in comedy and in tragi-comedy, but that attention was called to this fact by the authors of the plays; and, furthermore, we feel justified in saying that this was done for the purpose of making the plays correspond to an accepted law of the drama. We find no evidence of any one,

* Ibid., p. 35. † Ibid., p. 37. ‡ Ibid., p. 40.

§ *Nat. Dict. Biog.*, Article on Gosson.

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prior to the year 1711, arguing in favor of the non-observance of such a law, though it was ignored by some dramatic writers. The Puritan spirit was so strong on the side of ethics that dramatic writers had to make the best of the situation. They were obliged to profit by the suggestions which came from Puritan sources and make the drama appear to serve the cause of morality. English tragedy was only eighteen years old when Gosson described the theatre as *The School of Abuse*, and the players found it to their advantage to practice their profession in that part of London which was independent of the City Fathers. The Puritan attack on the drama was unmercifully severe. Gosson, as we have indicated, wrote a play, but in spite of the fact that it contained a moral lesson which he himself pointed out, he allowed his Puritan prejudices to take possession of him to such an extent that he condemned the play, saying, "I have sinned and am sorry for my fault."*

The activity of this Puritan spirit was such as to provoke sooner or later a very formal defence of poetry. Lodge was the first to come to the rescue, and Gosson's *School of Abuse* was the immediate object of his counter-attack. Nevertheless, his work was only a forerunner of Sidney's, which was to come soon after. In the *Defence of Poetry* published by Thomas Lodge in 1579 there is a passage which reduces to a single sentence his leading observation on the subject. "Poets," he says, "were the first raysors of cities, prescribers of good lawes, mayntayners of religion, disturbers of the wicked, advancers

* Arber Reprints, p. 41.

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of the well disposed, inventors of laws, and lastly the very foot-paths to knowledge and understanding.”* No comment is necessary here unless to point out that the principle of poetic justice is hinted at in the reference to the “wicked” and the “well disposed.” Neither the Puritans on the one side nor the Defenders on the other appear willing to overlook this principle. We shall find, also, that Sidney accepted it.

SIDNEY’S ETHICAL REQUIREMENT IN POETRY.

Sir Philip Sidney was the greatest of the Defenders. Referring to his most important work in literary criticism, Ward says, in his *English Poets*, “The *Apologie for Poetrie* was written in or about 1581 (the first known edition is that of London 1595).”† We know that Sidney’s friends were acquainted with the work long before the time of its publication, and that Sir John Harington referred to it in his own *Apologie* which was published in 1591. It is clear, therefore, that Sidney’s theory of poetry was developed shortly after the time when Gascoigne, Whetstone and Gosson wrote their plays. This is important, because Sidney seems to regard the principle of poetic justice as one that should be applied to poetry in general. His reference to the question of rewards and punishments is set forth in the following words: “Now, to that which commonly is attributed to the prayse of histories, in respect of the notable learning is gotten by marking the successe, as though therein a man should see vertue exalted and vice punished. Truly that

* Smith, I., p. 75.

† Ward, I., p. 340.

SIDNEY'S ETHICAL REQUIREMENT

commendation is peculiar to Poetry, and farre of from History. For indeede Poetry ever setteth vertue so out in her best cullours, making Fortune her wel-wayting hand-mayd, that one must needs be enamoured of her. Well may you see Uliesses in a storme and in other hard plights; but they are but exercises of patience and magnanimitie, to make them shine the more in the neer-following prosperitie. And of the contrarie part, if evill men come to the stage, they ever go out (as the Tragedie Writer answered to one that misliked the shew of such persons) so manacled as they little animate folkes to follow them. But the Historian, being captived to the trueth of a foolish world, is many times a terror from well doing, and an encouragement to unbridled wickedness."*

Here we have a reference to the doctrine of poetic justice about which there can be no quibble. It is clear beyond question that Sidney applies the principle to that kind of poetry with which he is concerned in his defence. If we want to know what that kind of poetry is, we need only study the attack that had been made on poetry. It is hardly necessary to say that the question is one which concerns dramatic poetry as a whole; but at the same time it is proper to remark that, in the passage which we have under consideration, Sidney seems to have chiefly in mind the kind of poetry which involves a tragic ending.

May we say that Sidney introduced the doctrine of poetic justice? To answer such a question affirmatively would be to make a double mistake. In

* Ibid., I., p. 169.

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the first place, it would mean a rejection of the assumption that certain dramatic writers of the previous decade had deliberately applied the principle to the composition of their plays. In the second place, it would mean that he himself felt he was introducing into English criticism a new test by which to judge of poetry. Sidney was not the first to introduce the principle into literary criticism in England. The idea seems to have been traditional with the critics, and in no case is this more apparent than in the case of Sir Philip Sidney. At first sight it might seem that this assertion is difficult of proof. Let us, therefore, make a close examination of the passage we have quoted. First of all, we must observe that Sidney is attempting to show that poetry is preferable to history,—and here we must stop to explain his use of the word history. The question at issue is as ancient as any question with which literary criticism is concerned. A story which presents a faithful record of a real occurrence is called history. A story which presents an idealized record of a possible occurrence is called poetry. Plato made the distinction, and so did Aristotle. Plato called poets liars because they departed from the truth in their idealizations, even in so small a matter as ascribing to the gods some of the emotions which are common to men. Some of the ecclesiastical writers of the middle ages objected to poetry for a similar reason. As time went on, we find evidence that critics argued pro and con on the subject. It is a common thing to find the seventeenth century critics expending considerable energy in an attempt to prove that the poet should use, not the facts of

SIDNEY'S ETHICAL REQUIREMENT

history, but rather a sort of fiction, a fable, an idealized version of some possible occurrence.

The first thing we observe, then, in Sidney's argument is the emphasis which he lays on the superiority of fiction over history in so far as poetry is concerned. He objects to history on the ground that it has a morally bad effect. The historian, he says, makes no distinction in regard to the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice; he frequently narrates events which illustrate the violation of this ethical principle, and as a result he instills into the minds of men no love of virtue and no hatred of vice,—many times, indeed, he creates in the minds of men an aversion for the good and encourages them to plunge into a career of unbridled wickedness. Sidney does not content himself with the mere assertion that this is the case. He takes up the actual facts of history to show that they offer, in some instances, absolutely no encouragement to the practice of virtue; "For," says he, "see we not the valiant Milciades rot in his fetters? The just Phocion and the accomplished Socrates put to death like Traytors? The cruell Severus lives prosperously? The excellent Severus miserably murdered? Sylla and Marius dying in thyr beddes? Pompey and Cicero slaine then when they would have thought exile a happiness? See we not virtuous Catō driven to kyll himselfe? And rebel Cæsar so advanced that his name yet, after 1600 yeares, lasteth in the highest honor. And marke but even Cæsars own words of the forenamed Sylla (who in that only did honestly, to put down his dishonest tyrannie) *Literas nescivit*, as if want of learning caused him

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to doe well. He meant it not by Poetrie, which not content with earthly plagues, deviseth new punishments in hel for Tyrants: nor yet by Philosophie, which teacheth Occidendos esse; but no doubt by skill in Historie, for that indeede can afford your Cipselus, Periander, Phalaris, Dionisius, and I know not how many more of the same kennell, that speede well enough in their abhominable injustice or usurpation.”*

The real facts of history are not, according to Sidney, suitable for the use of a poet. Why? Because the facts of history too often represent the triumph of wickedness and the overthrow of virtue. He might have gone farther, and proved the proposition that it is necessary for poetry to depict the prosperity of the good and the downfall of the bad, but he does not do so. He seems to take it for granted that such is the function of true poetry; he actually declares that it is peculiar to poetry to portray the exaltation of virtue and the punishment of vice, not occasionally but always.

It is not surprising that Sidney should accept the doctrine of poetic justice in such a simple and direct way. He was merely accepting as a matter of course a traditional conception of the function of poetry. Every important critical writer that immediately preceded him had not only referred to the principle, but had made no attempt to reject it or to limit its application to one species of dramatic writing. On the side of literary criticism, then, there was no reason why he should think that the principle needed any defence. The Puritans had not

* Ibid., I., p. 170.

SIDNEY'S ETHICAL REQUIREMENT

objected to it, nor were they likely to object to it. They were not interested in the æsthetic qualities of poetry; they concerned themselves wholly with the ethical consideration. * The doctrine of universal poetic justice satisfied, in one particular, their most extreme ethical requirement. There was, therefore, no cause why they should raise any objection to it, and consequently no occasion for Sidney's attempting a defence.

The fact that the doctrine of poetic justice had been received without question whenever and wherever there was occasion to refer to it, was not the only reason which prompted Sidney to accept it as a standard principle of poetry; he had observed in literature itself many admirable illustrations of the principle. In fact, he appears to have come across no cause in which the rule was violated; for he says that "if evill men come to the stage, they ever go out . . . so manacled as they little animate folkes to follow them."*

No, Sidney had no reason to think that the idea of a just distribution of rewards and punishments was something new in poetry; and, consequently, his defence was only indirectly concerned with the question. His thesis was this: Historical narrative is usually unpoetical in its essence and therefore unfit for poetry. Why, it may be asked, should he lay particular stress on such a proposition, if his defence were occasioned by the puritan attack? There is no reason why he should here take note of a difficulty that goes back to the time of Plato; he discusses it because it is a question of the hour

* Loc. cit. p. 89.

POETIC JUSTICE IN THE DRAMA

At any rate, between the time when Sidney began his writing of the *Apologie* and the date of its publication, Sir E. Hoby made an English translation of Coignet's *Politique*, which he gave to the public in 1586, the year of Sidney's death. Obviously the English translation of the *Politique* could have had very little influence upon Sidney; nevertheless, it affords us an evidence of the vigor with which the enemies of poetry were urging against it the objection that it narrates untruths, and with such kind of objection Sidney was familiar. Chapter xxxv. of the *Politique* contains a strong attack on poets because they modify the facts of history. Plato is quoted as writing "that Poetrie consisted in the cunning invention of fables which are false narration resembling the true," and to Simonides is attributed the opinion that the end of both poetry and painting "is but to yield pleasure by lying."* It was proper, of course, for Sidney to take note of this objection. That he did so, is an evidence that he had read some such discussion of the question as was found in the *Politique*, or that among those with whom he associated were critics who declared themselves in favor of historical plays. Be that as it may, we feel certain that he had some particular reason for arguing against the use of history in poetry, and no reason whatever for making any ex-professo defence of the principle of poetic justice; nor did he make any defence. He accepted the traditional view that the principle was fundamental in poetry, and clearly incorporated the idea in his great critical essay.

The next two critics to be named, Webbe and

* Smith, I., p. 341.

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Nash, may be assigned a place of minor importance in our investigation. Both agree that even out of the best plays some good may be derived, but at the same time they maintain that this rule applies only to persons of mature years. Webbe in his lengthy *Discourse of English Poetrie*, which was published in 1586, refers to the ethical function of poetry only slightly, giving it as his opinion "that the wantonest Poets of all, in their most lascivious workes wherein they busied themselves, sought rather by that means to withdraw mens mindes (especially the best natures) from such foul vices then to allure them to embrace such beastly follies as they detected."* In a like manner the moral lessons of poetry are referred to by Thomas Nash in *The Anatomie of Absurditie*, published in 1589. "Even as the Bee out of the bitterest flowers and sharpest thistles gathers honey," he says, "so out of the filthiest Fables may profitable knowledge be sucked and selected. Neverthelesse, tender youth ought to be restrained for a time from the reading of such ribauldrie."†

PUTTENHAM'S TREATMENT OF THE PROBLEM.

In 1589 there was published by Richard Field a work entitled *The Arte of English Poesie*. Richard Field was not the author of the work; the manuscript came into his hands without "any authours name or any other ordinarie address."‡ Subsequently it was attributed to George Puttenham, but it is the opinion of G. G. Smith "that the traditional ascrip-

* Ibid., I., p. 251.

† Ibid., I., p. 332.

‡ Ibid., II., p. 1.

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tion to George must be abandoned, and that a better heading would have been 'Richard Puttenham' or simply Puttenham."* Considered as a whole, *The Arte of English Poesie* is similar to Sidney's *Apologie*. We may even go so far as to say that Puttenham had read Sidney's manuscript and drew much of his inspiration from it. Both works argue in favor of the ethical function of poetry, both observe that the spectacle of rewarded virtue and punished wickedness has a good effect on those who witness it, both find it worth while defending poets against the accusation that they are falsifiers. Sidney was, of course, the greater literary artist, the more original thinker. His work is a monument to his memory. This fact, however, should not lessen the importance which is here to be given to Puttenham's treatise on *The Arte of English Poesie*. No matter how obscure the writer is, the fact remains that he discussed the problem with which we are concerned in this investigation.

In one respect in particular, Puttenham's treatise is more valuable than that of Sidney, for he points out a species of dramatic composition which does not seem to have exemplified the workings of the principle of poetic justice. So far in English criticism it was apparently taken for granted that the principle applied to all dramatic forms—at least, we can discover nothing to the contrary. It is, therefore, of special interest to us to find Puttenham saying that the 'new comedy' of the ancient Greeks shows a breaking away from the general rule. Puttenham does not put the proposition in this direct form

* Ibid., II., p. 407, note.

PUTTENHAM'S TREATMENT

but in substance that is what he says. To make this truth apparent it will be necessary to consider in its entirety his treatment of the subject of rewards and punishments.

The passage in which Puttenham discusses the moral effects produced by the drama contains a quasi-historical account of the beginnings of theatrical performances. "Some perchance," he says, "would thinke that next after the praise and honoring of their gods should commence the worshippings and praise of good men, and specially of great Princes and governours of the earth in soveraignety and function next unto the gods. But it is not so, for before that came to passe the Poets or holy Priests chiefly studied the rebuke of vice, and to carpe at the common abuses, such as were most offensive to the publique and private, for as yet for lacke of good civility and wholesome doctrines there was greater store of lewde lourdaines then of wise and learned Lords or of noble and vertuous Princes and governours."*

Here we observe that according to Puttenham the drama had an ethical purpose from the very beginning, inasmuch as its chief aim was to teach men to be good by using the theatre to rebuke those that are bad. It may appear that he overlooks the question of praising those that are good, but such is not the case, for he says in the next sentence that the poets found "much to reprove and little to praise." In those very early times, he says, the temples of the gods were used for the purpose of instructing the people in these matters; the effect

* Ibid., II., p. 31.

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was similar to that of a sermon; and the form was either satire, comedy, or tragedy.* Each of these forms is discussed at some length, and then he introduces his reference to new comedy, of which the distinctive feature was this, that it eliminated the fault-finding element, and thus became—to use his own words—“more civill and pleasant a great deale.”†

In order the better to understand what Puttenham means in this portion of his treatise we must make a distinction in regard to his use of the words tragedy and comedy. Both terms may embrace the modern idea of tragedy, for the reason that the chief distinction between the two in antiquity‡ was not so much in the treatment of a subject as in the fact that the former dealt with the actions of heroes, princes, kings, and the like, while the latter dealt with the actions of ordinary men. Both kinds of plays should end tragically, whereas new comedy takes a more cheerful view of life and aims at pleasing.

Puttenham gives as a reason for the backwardness of tragedy in the beginning, that the kings and other suitable subjects for tragedy were not numerous enough to give the necessary cause for the writing of tragedies. As soon, however, as it became apparent that the punishment which the gods had visited upon the crimes of certain kings and heroes of the past might serve as a well-timed

* Ibid., II., p. 32.

† Ibid., II., p. 34.

‡ The use of the word *antiquity* in this case applies to the period of decline in Greek literature. Before Aristotle's time there was a more correct idea of the character of the tragic hero.

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warning for the living, true tragedy was given its place in the literature. The poets waited till "posterity stood no more in dread" of these miserable sovereigns; then, says Puttenham, "their infamous life and tyrannies were layd open to all the world, their wickednes reproached, their follies and extreme insolencies derided, and their miserable ends pointed out in playes and pageants, to show the mutabilitie of fortune, and the just punishment of God in revenge of a vicious and evill life."*

According to Puttenham, then, tragedy did not begin to exist until there was need of teaching the great and powerful of the earth that just as surely as divine vengeance had brought misery to those of their rank who did wicked things in the past, so also would they be punished if they did not live virtuous lives. It is not necessary to prove that by this he meant to imply not only that the idea of poetic justice was in a most strict sense fundamental to tragedy, but also that tragedy had in the beginning no reason to exist unless it was to portray the punishment of vice and, by inference, the reward of virtue. Such are the simplest conclusions that are to be drawn from his treatment of the subject.

The passages of *The Arte of English Poesie*, to which reference has already been made, give, as has been indicated, a somewhat one-sided conception of the idea of poetic justice. The Dennis-Addison controversy on the subject made it clear that this peculiar doctrine called for a perfect distribution not only of punishments but also of rewards. We have noted that while Puttenham regarded it the

* Ibid., p. 35.

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business of the drama to portray the punishment of the wicked, he does not lay much emphasis on the reward of virtue. That is true only so far as our quotations are concerned. Puttenham returns to the subject in Chapter xvi. of his work and makes up for any previous neglect. To some extent he repeats himself, but not without the effect of making his meaning more clear. The most striking passage in that chapter is as follows: "As the bad and illawdable parts of all estates and degrees were taxed by the Poets in one sort or another, and those of great Princes by Tragedie in especial, and not till after their deaths, as hath been before remembred, to th' extent that such exemplifying (as it were) of their blames and adversities, being now dead, might worke for secret reprehension to others that were alive, living in the same or like abuses: so was it great reason that all good and vertuous persons should for their well doings be rewarded with commendation, and the great Princes above all others with honors and praises, being for many respects of greater moment to have them good and vertuous then any inferior sort of men."* Here we have the required balancing of rewards and punishments. A close inspection of Puttenham's language, however, makes it appear that our use of the term 'rewards' gives us a slightly forced interpretation. It is quite possible for the virtuous to come to an unhappy end, such as that of Desdemona in *Othello*, and yet have their praises sung at the very end of the play; but it is not likely that Puttenham was describing any reward of this kind. The commendation of which

* Ibid., pp. 36-37.

PUTTENHAM'S TREATMENT

he speaks, is put in direct contrast with the punishments of God,' mentioned above: it is only proper to suppose that since Puttenham has already pointed to the miserable end of the wicked, he now intends to refer to the happy end of the good.

We have noted that Sidney found it advisable to discuss the relative merits of fact and fiction and that he argued for the superiority of fiction. The same thing occurs in *The Arte of English Poesie*. Puttenham says on the subject "that the historical poets used not the matter so precisely to wish that all they wrote should be accounted true, for that was not needeful nor expedient to the purpose, namely to be used either for example or for pleasure: considering that many times it is seene a fained matter or altogether fabulous, besides it maketh more mirth than any other, works no lesse good conclusions for example than the most true and veritable, but often times more, because the Poet hath the handling of them to fashion at his pleasure, but not so of the other, which must go according to their veritie, and none otherwise without the writers great blame."* Pursuing this subject still further, he maintains that in a single day a good wit may produce more "fained" examples of virtuous conduct than "many ages through mans frailtie are able to put in ure;† which made the learned and wittie men of those times to devise many historical matters of no veritie at all, but with purpose to do good and no hurt, as using them for a manner of discipline and president of commendable life."‡ Puttenham observes that

* Ibid., p. 42.

† Old English form for use.

‡ Smith, II., p. 42.

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not only did the poets exercise their talents in this way, but that they also made it their business to select from actual history only those events that might teach men good moral lessons. The point which is here made by the author of *The Arte of English Poesie* illustrates how closely related to the discussion of poetic justice is that concerning the use of fact and fiction. One class of critics objected to the use of some of the facts of history because they failed to show how virtue was to be rewarded and vice punished, the other class of critics objected to fiction because it represented something that was untrue and made it the business of poets to be liars. The opinion that made the poets out to be liars was analyzed by several of the defenders, the result being that the argument was reversed. Fiction, said the defenders, represents the ideal truth, therefore the universal truth; history represents the contrary. Fiction illustrates the workings of ideal and eternal justice; history outrages our sense of justice. Fiction rewards the good and punishes the bad always; history more frequently permits the good to suffer and the wicked to prosper. Such was the form that the defense finally took. In the time of Sidney and Puttenham we find the beginning of such a defence. The argument was not, of course, so thoroughly worked out as we have here indicated; but substantially it was the same.

The first purpose of the drama, then, was to teach men a moral lesson, a lesson that was not to be taught unless through the application of poetic justice. This was the conclusion which Puttenham drew from his study of Greek literature. Plato,

HARINGTON'S DISCUSSION

it is well known, objected to poets on the supposition that they were liars. We may regard this as the first objection that was raised against them; for this reason, and also because the objection was taken seriously in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it is interesting to remark that the most effective of the arguments made against it by the early critics was founded on the theory that poetic justice, which was characteristic of fiction, represented the highest possible kind of truth. Such being the case, we have good reason to be on the look-out for those passages in literary criticism which call attention to the objection for the purpose of refuting it. Sidney and Puttenham, as we have seen, took the objection very seriously, a lead that was followed by almost every English literary critic for more than a century afterwards. Harington treated the problem in 1591, Bacon in 1605, Hobbes in 1650, Philips in 1675, Rymer in 1678, Dryden on various occasions, and others in the eighteenth century, like Addison and Dennis.

HARINGTON'S DISCUSSION OF POETRY.

Sir John Harington, the first among those whom we have just mentioned, published, in 1591, *A Brief Apologie of Poetrie* in the form of a preface to a translation of *Orlando Furioso*. Here again the critic takes it for granted that poetry had in the beginning an ethical function; for Harington says of the "first writers and devisers" of poetry, that they intended that it should be employed "to soften and polish the hard and rough dispositions of men, and make them capable of virtue and good

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discipline.”* The form which the *Apologie* takes is suggested by the list of objections which he enumerates, and first among these is the calumny that poets are liars. Cornelius Agrippa, he says, made a bitter attack on poetry saying “that it is a nurse of lies, a pleaser of fooles, a breeder of dangerous errors, and an inticer of wantonnes.”† Point by point he takes up these objections and refutes them. He does not, however, give them equal importance. Nearly all his defence is concerned with the first.

Harington's argument in favor of fiction as opposed to historical truth in poetry makes it still more certain that the early English critics thought that the chief aim of the poet was to base his moral lessons upon a representation of the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice. We have maintained that this view was traditional among the critics, for the reason that all seemed to have accepted the doctrine as a matter of course, only calling attention to the fact, when poetry was objected to on the ground of ethics. Harington goes a step farther and shows by a concrete example how the principle worked. It is important that the critic's own words should be quoted in order to show how evident it is that he is dealing with the principle of poetical justice. The passage to be quoted is as follows: “Perseus sonne of Jupiter is fained by the Poets to have slaine Gorgon, and, after that conquest atchieved, to have flown up to heaven. The Historicall sence is this, Perseus the sonne of Iupiter, by participation of Jupiters vertues which were in him or rather comming of the stock of one of the Kings

* Ibid., p. 197.

† Ibid., p. 99.

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of Crete, or Athens, so called, slew Gorgon, a tryant in that countrey (Gorgon in Greeke signifieth earth), and was for his vertuous parts exalted by men up unto heaven. Morally it signifieth this much: Perseus a wise man, sonne of Jupiter, endewed with virtue from above, slayeth sinne and vice, a thing base & earthly signified by Gorgon, and so mounteth up to the sky of virtue. It signifies in one kind of Allegorie this much: the mind of man being gotten by God, and so the childe of God killing and vanquishing the earthlinesse of this Gorgonicall nature, ascendeth up to the understanding of heavenly things, of high things, of eternal things, in which contemplacion consisteth the perfection of man: this is the natural allegory, because man (is) one of the chiefe works of nature. It hath also a more high and heavenly allegorie, that the heavenly nature, daughter of Iupiter, procuring with her continuall motion corruption and mortality in the inferiour bodies, and flew up on high, and there remaineth for ever. It hath also another Theological Allegorie: that the angelicall nature, daughter of the most high God the creator of all things, killing and overcomming all bodily substance signified by Gorgon, ascended into heaven. The like infinite Allegories I could pike out of other Poeticall fictions, save that I would avoid tediousness.”*

Referring now to this passage from Harington, we note that he calls attention to the reward of virtue as well as to the punishment of vice. He even takes a situation in which it is necessary to prove that a given action is virtuous in order to

* Ibid., pp. 202-203.

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account for the reward which follows. The killing of Gorgon is not a crime but rather a praise-worthy act, and consequently the poet must reward Perseus who has done the deed. On the other hand, Gorgon is a tyrant, and should be punished for the wrong he had done. Harington satisfies the requirement of justice by bringing him to an unhappy end,—he is slain by the hand of Perseus. Harington's illustration is not worked out in all its details and therefore we are unable to discover wherein his notion of poetic justice would be out of harmony with that of Rymer. But there it is, essentially the same as that to which Addison objected in 1711. We should not say it was essentially the same unless we felt reasonably sure that Harington applied the principle to tragedy in such a way as to admit of no exception. It seems certain that the only exception recognized by any of these early critics was in favor of the form of play called the 'new comedy.' Addison made a more sweeping exception. He was first disposed to reject the principle altogether, but afterwards contented himself with saying that tragedy was as successful in the violation as in the observance of the law. Dennis, held, with Rymer, that the doctrine of poetic justice must be applied unfailingly to tragedy, and in this he seems to be supported by the leading critics of the sixteenth century and particularly by those who argued against the use of unidealized history. In arguing for an idealization of events, the critics merely argue that wickedness should never be portrayed in attractive colors and that virtue should never be so depicted as to discourage men from being good. If this is a fair

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estimate of the opinions of the English critics of the sixteenth century, and I think it is, there is nothing unwarranted in the assertion that the doctrine of poetic justice was traditional in English literary criticism more than a century in advance of the time when Addison rebelled against it. It is quite certain, on the one hand, that Addison and Johnson and other writers of the eighteenth century favored the dramatic theory that tragedy should take life as it is, and hold the mirror up to nature. They regarded it proper that virtue be represented as suffering, simply for the reason that such a representation is true to life. But Dennis did not think such a representation proper; Rymer was most decidedly opposed to any spectacle of suffering innocence; and may we not say that the same rigorous doctrine was maintained by every sixteenth century critic who declared himself against the use of unidealized history? To prove that such a doctrine was not maintained by these critics is to prove the impossible.

Before concluding the discussion of Harington's defense of poetical fiction, it will be well to quote an illustration which he uses to show how a fable may serve to express the truth: "Bishop Fisher, a stout prelate (though I do not praise his Religion), when he was assailed by king Henrie the eight for his good will and assent for the suppression of Abbeyes, the King alledging that he would but take away their superfluities and let the substance stand still, or at least see it be converted to better and more goodly uses, the grave Bishop answered it in this kind of Poeticall parable. He said there was an

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axe that, wanting a helve, came to a thicke and huge overgrowne wood, & besought some of the great oaks in that wood to spare him so much timber as to make him a handle or helve, promising that if he might finde that favour he would in recompence thereof have great regard in preserving that wood, in pruning the branches, in cutting away the unprofitable and superfluous boughs, in paring away the bryers and thornes that were combersome to the fayre trees, and make it in fine a grove of great delight and pleasure: but when this same axe had obtained his suit, he so laid about him, so pared away both timber and top and lop, that in short space of a woodland he made it a champion, and made her liberalitie the instrument of her overthrow.

"Now though this Bishop had no very good successe with his parable, yet it was so farre from being counted a lye, that it was plainly seen soone after that the same axe did both hew down those woods by the roots & spared off him by the head, and was a peece of Prophecie as well as a peece of Poetrie."*

The unusual prominence given to the question whether or not fiction is to be preferred to fact is only one of the features in that sixteenth century controversy which meant life or death to the drama. When Harington wrote his treatise on Poetry, the Blackfriars Theatre, which was established in defiance of Puritanism, was only fifteen years in existence and still had to contend against its original enemy. A few years later when this theatre was destroyed

* Ibid., pp. 204-205.

BAÇON AND HIS SUCCESSORS

by fire, the same enemy tried to prevent its rebuilding. Blackfriars was rebuilt, but the fact remains that the opposition against which it had to contend helps us to understand why literary criticism was still endeavoring to show that poetry was essentially ethical inasmuch as it depicted the highest form of truth and made men virtuous by teaching them practical lessons of morality.

BAÇON AND SOME OF HIS SUCCESSORS.

The first half of the seventeenth century produced only one critical work that we can use to any special advantage for the purpose of this investigation. That work was written by Francis Bacon and was published by him in 1605 under the title *Of the Advancement of Learning*. The work is divided into two books, and each book is subdivided into chapters. The fourth chapter of the second book deals with the subject of poetry and contains a passage which Worsfold refers to as an enunciation of what is essentially the modern conception of poetic justice.* Worsfold, while he does not attempt to search English Criticism for the earliest references to this doctrine, goes far enough to refer the question back to a critic who wrote on the subject about three fourths of a century before the time of Rymer. Curiously enough the discussion of poetic justice to which Worsfold calls attention in Bacon's essay is chiefly concerned with the question of fiction as opposed to fact.

Treating of the matter of poetry, Bacon says that it "is nothing else but feigned history, which

* *The Principles of Criticism*, p. 81.

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may be styled as well in prose as in verse.”* It is in this fashion that he closes his first paragraph on poetry. The old-time question, then, is uppermost in his mind, and he at once proceeds to discuss it. We shall quote in full the paragraph that contains, according to Worsfold, the enunciation of the modern conception of poetic justice:

“The use of this feigned history hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is, agreeable to the spirit of man, a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety, than can be found in the nature of things. Therefore, because the acts or events of true history have not that magnitude which satisfieth the mind of man, poesy feigneth acts and events greater and more heroical. Because true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence. Because true history representeth actions and events more ordinary and less interchanged, therefore poesy endueth them with more rareness, and more unexpected and alternative variations. So as it appeareth that poesy serveth and conferreth to magnanimity morality, and to delectation. And therefore it was ever thought to have some participation of divineness, because it doth raise and erect the mind, by submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind; whereas reason doth buckle

* *Of the Advancement of Learning*, p. 101.

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and bow the mind unto the nature of things. And we see that by these insinuations and congruities with man's nature and pleasure, joined also with the agreement and consort it hath with music, it hath had access and estimation in rude times and barbarous regions, where other learning stood excluded."*

Of course, the important sentence in the foregoing quotation is that which notes the fact that true history does not properly distribute the rewards and the punishment of action, giving this as a reason why poetry introduces the fable, in which actions and their consequences are more in harmony with the idea of justice and the providence of God. There is no doubt whatsoever that Bacon is here discussing the principle of poetic justice. Did he regard it as a law of poetry? It seems so; for he makes no argument to the contrary and he makes no distinction as regards the particular forms of poetical composition. His argument follows the general line of some of those who preceded him, but is not so lengthy. Bacon follows Puttenham to the extent of giving prominence to the same problem in literary criticism that he laid emphasis upon. He also follows Puttenham in the matter of discussing the allegorical interpretation of poetry, thereby making it still more evident that poetry is strong in its ethical effects. But Bacon departs from critical tradition somewhat when he says, near the end of his chapter on poetry, that in his opinion fables were not invented to produce moral effects. On this point he says, "I do rather think that the fable was first, and

* Ibid., pp. 101-102.

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the exposition devised, than that the moral was first, and thereupon the fable framed."* He illustrates his opinion by certain examples, and offers it as his judgment that Homer had in view no special inward meaning in what he wrote. Bacon, then, is to be taken into account in tracing the development of the idea of poetry in English literary criticism. On the one hand he confirms us in our judgment that the doctrine of poetic justice was traditional with the men of his time, and on the other hand he suggests a departure from the extreme position recently taken by Harington. He believes that poetry should instruct, but at the same time he thinks that there is more instruction read into some of the earliest poets than they intended. That he took up this subject at all, is to be explained by the fact that some fourteen years earlier Harington had given in his *Apologie* an exposition of the three meanings of poetry, the literal, the moral and the allegorical. It was against the allegorical interpretation of poetry that Bacon argued. He did not find it a fault in the poet to be allegorical in his meaning, but he thought that the interpreters had gone too far in using this method of reading a meaning into the works of the masters. However, the stand that Bacon took in regard to the question of allegory does not change the fact that he applied the principle of poetic justice to poetry in general.

From Bacon to Davenant there are no sources of literary criticism in English, that is, from 1605 to 1650. Within this period Shakespeare wrote some of his best plays, but no prefaces, no essays

* Ibid., p. 104.

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in criticism,—nothing but plays; when he died, the drama entered upon a period of decline. In 1629 women were first seen on the English stage, and the consequence was a storm of protest, but no literary critic. In 1642 there was issued an ordinance of both houses of parliament for the suppressing of public stage plays throughout the Kingdom.* This law went into effect rigorously, and as a result the English theatre shows no activity for fourteen years. Then came the period of the Restoration with Dryden for its chief poet and critic; it was also the period which produced Rymer who distinguished himself so signally as an advocate of poetic justice, and brought the doctrine into disrepute by the fury with which he used it as an executioner's axe in his attack upon Shakespeare and other English dramatists. Between Bacon and Dryden there is no English critic of consequence. A few names may be mentioned. Among these is Davenant who argued for fiction in poetry, saying in 1650 that it is "more worthy to seek out truth in the Passions then to record the truth of Actions;"† he dealt with the ethical situation in these words, "Poets are of all moralists the most useful . . . 'tis injurious not to think Poets the most useful moralists."‡ Hobbess is to be mentioned for the fact that in 1650 he discussed the limits within which the poet might depart from actual historical fact; he says, that "as truth is the bound of Historical, so Resemblance of truth is the utmost limit of

* Collier, II., p. 104.

† Spingarn, *Critical Essays*, II., p. 3.

‡ Ibid., II., p. 49.

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Poetical Liberty.”* Fleckno in 1664 complained against excessive immorality in the drama; he followed the ethical consideration along philosophical lines and reached the conclusion that the chief end of the drama “is to render Folly ridiculous, and Virtue and Noblenesse so amiable and lovely, as everyone should be delighted and enamoured with it.”† Thomas Shadwell in 1671 said that the most proper function of comedy is “to reprehend some of the Vices and Follies of the Age,”‡ and he paid his compliments to Dryden by saying, “I must take leave to Dissent from those who seem to insinuate that the ultimate end of the Poet is to delight, without correction or instruction.”§ A close analysis of the opinions of these four writers might help to make our case a little stronger if any one should doubt that it is strong enough.

That Rymer did not introduce and could not have introduced the doctrine of poetic justice into English criticism needs no further proof. The doctrine was traditional, as we have shown, since English literary criticism began; and even before English literary criticism began, it was a recognized principle of the drama, as is evident from the words of An Act of Parliament, in 1543, which showed a spirit of toleration for only such plays as had for object “the rebuking and reproaching of vices, and the setting forth of virtue.”||

* Ibid., II., p. 62.

† Ibid., II., p. 96.

‡ Ibid., II., p. 153.

§ Ibid.

|| Collier, I., p. 130.

DRYDEN'S IDEA OF TRAGEDY

CHAPTER III

Two Prominent Advocates of Poetic Justice

DRYDEN'S IDEA OF TRAGEDY

LET us turn once more to the Dennis-Addison controversy. It has been taken as the point of departure for the two problems of research with which we have been so far concerned, the one dealing with the assertion that Aristotle was the author of the doctrine of poetic justice, the other dealing with the proposition that this doctrine was first introduced into English literary criticism by Rymer. A third line of investigation is suggested by this same controversy, since the contending forces maintained a striking difference of opinion in a matter concerning the fundamental function of dramatic art. It was certainly an interesting discussion, considered historically, not only because a large portion of our literary criticism developed out of the controversy, but also because the question of poetic justice was itself closely related to those other questions of dramatic criticism which were answered in such a spirit of dogmatism by the French writers of the seventeenth century. It was a matter of some consequence whether or not the influence of Renaissance Classicism should dominate English literature; and on this account it is worth while attempting to discover how much success was achieved by Rymer and his immediate followers,

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in advocating the theory of poetic justice, and how far-reaching in its effects upon dramatic art in general was the body of literary criticism which took Rymer's theory into consideration.

First of all, it is important to determine what was the English idea in regard to the function of the drama at the time that the controversy began. It would be well to bear in mind here the remark of Spingarn, already quoted,* that towards the close of the seventeenth century the work of Dryden showed the influence of French classicism. Such an influence, he says, had been felt to some extent for more than a century, but it was not the influence of a dictator. Dryden, it may be said, was an apt and ready pupil in the new school, observing its disciplinary laws with a spirit of obedience somewhat extraordinary in a man of such versatility and talent. This does not mean, however, that he had no mind of his own with respect to the principles of literary art. His shifting policy in regard to religion might be taken as an indication that he was not a man of unwavering convictions in other matters.† We

* See page 17.

† In making this assertion I do not mean to imply that there was a total lack of honesty in Dryden's profession of faith either as a Protestant or a Catholic. During the years of his greatest activity as a man of letters he was subjected to those influences that prevailed so powerfully against the Church of Rome throughout England. In the time of the Commonwealth he was, of course, a Puritan; and when Cromwell died, he published his *Heroic Stanzas* in memory of the Protector. Two years later he dedicated to the leader of the Restoration, King Charles, a poem called *Astraea Redux*, and subsequently he so increased his popularity at court, that he was appointed

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know that his career in politics shows such variations as might be expected from a man who would not allow his political beliefs to interfere with his popularity; we know that his admiration for Aristotle took a turn in 1693 when he insinuated that the Greek critic's conclusions on tragedy were too narrow, because the material on which he worked was limited to the plays of Sophocles and Euripides;* we know that his respect for Rymer as a judicious

to the office of poet-laureate in 1668. At the time of the accession of James II., when he embraced the Catholic faith, Dryden's reputation as a man of letters had been well established. For some time he had labored in the field of literature with the purpose of pleasing the populace, as he himself had clearly stated in his *Defence* of 1668, and he had treated the critics with notable deference in spite of their attacks upon him; but now he has higher motives in what he writes, a clearer perception of what is the ultimate good of living, and less favors to seek from critics or politicians. Then, too, it is not to be forgotten that his wife and son had joined the Catholic Church and had contributed their share to the influences which brought about the change in his own attitude towards religion. At least, he is to be given the benefit of any doubt concerning his honesty in making the change, a view that is strengthened considerably when one remembers that he did not forsake the Catholic faith at the time of the Revolution in 1688, when a return to Protestantism might have had the effect of retaining him in the office of poet-laureate and historiographer royal. Rather than be untrue to his religious convictions, he sacrificed the income which the post might bring him, and accepted the alternative of making a living as best he could without the special assistance of royal patronage. It is probable that his conversion to the Church of Rome was characterized by a degree of sincerity not to be discovered in his career as a politician.

* Dryden, *Works*, XV., p. 383.

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critic, in 1678,† had disappeared by 1693 when he severely excoriated him for his ill-treatment of contemporary dramatists;‡ and we know, also, that Dryden not only changed his views in regard to the use of the rhyming couplet but also in regard to the definition of tragedy itself. In 1697 he saw fit to modify Aristotle's definition of tragedy in the following words: "It is an imitation of one entire, great, and probable action; not told but represented; which, by moving in us fear and pity, is conducive to the purging of those two passions in our minds."§ Here he limits the emotions, with which tragedy is concerned, to 'fear and pity,' not 'admiration, compassion, or concernment,' as was the case in his remarks on the subject eleven years earlier.|| Towards the end of his career as a dramatist he adds other emotions to these in order to make the idea of tragedy embrace those new passions which, as he says, the English writers have added. This change of view took place in the year 1693 when Dryden, writing on the blank pages of a copy of Rymer's *Last Age and Short View*, suggested some *Heads of an Answer to Rymer*. This contribution to literary criticism was not actually published

† Dryden, Preface to *All for Love, or the World Well Lost*, in *Works*, V., p. 338.

‡ Dryden, *Dedication of the Third Miscellany*, in *Works*, XII., pp. 55 ff. Dryden is hardly to be blamed for his attack on Rymer, since he was led to do this in a spirit of self-defence.

§ Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*, containing *The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy*, in *Works*, VI., p. 260.

|| *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy*, edited by W. P. Ker, I., p. 58.

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till ten years after the author's death; nevertheless, it is interesting, because it shows a development in Dryden's idea of tragedy. He says, "love, being an heroic passion, is fit for tragedy," and, again, "consider, if pity and terror be enough for tragedy to move; and I believe, upon a true definition of tragedy, it will be found that its work extends farther, and that it is to reform manners by a delightful representation of human life in great persons, by way of dialogue. If this be true, then not only pity and terror are to be moved, as the only means to bring us to virtue, but generally love to virtue, and hatred to vice, by showing the rewards of one, and punishments of the other: at least by rendering virtue always amiable, though it be shown unfortunate, and vice detestable, though it be shown triumphant. If, then, the encouragement of virtue, and the discouragement of vice, be the proper ends of poetry in tragedy, pity and terror, though good means, are not the only. For all the passions, in their turns, are to be set in a ferment; as joy, anger, love, fear, are to be used as the poet's common-places and a general concernment for the principle actors is to be raised, by making them appear such in their characters, their words, and actions, as will interest the audience in their fortunes."* This analysis of the problem in 1693 shows a sort of return to his undeveloped views of 1668, and a breaking away from the stricter interpretation of Aristotle which he favored in 1679.

* *Heads of an Answer to Rymer*, in *Works*, XV., pp. 382 ff.

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DRYDEN'S EARLY CRITICAL OPINIONS

Strictly speaking, the controversy with which we are chiefly concerned had its beginning with Addison's attack on the theory of poetic justice when, in 1711, he called it "a ridiculous doctrine of modern criticism"; but in order to determine what was the English idea of tragedy during the period which produced the conditions that gave rise to the controversy, it is necessary to take into consideration, not only Dryden's critical opinions concerning tragedy, but also those of Rymer, to whom was ascribed the distinction of introducing into English literary criticism the doctrine of poetic justice. Dryden had entered the field of literary criticism before Rymer, and continued to fulfil the office of literary critic even after the publication of Rymer's *Short View*. The volume of his critical work is vastly greater than that of Rymer, more conservative also, and more helpful. On some points he agreed with Rymer. He treated him with the respect that should be shown to a learned and distinguished man of letters. He seemed to be satisfied with the theory of poetic justice as it was expounded by Rymer, and he made it a point to exhibit the workings of the theory in the tragedies which he wrote. But these are generalizations. It is well to take up the detailed analysis of Dryden's more important critical observations and show the development of his views concerning the ethical function of poetry.

Dryden's first conception of the drama seems to have been that it was merely a picture of life,—very much like that of Dr. Johnson who, a century

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later, wanted the drama to hold up the mirror to nature. That Dryden held this opinion is the easiest conclusion to draw from his Prologue to *The Wild Gallant* which was first acted in 1663. "Nature," he says, "is old, which poets imitate."* The Prologue to the *Rival-Ladies*, a comedy, published in 1664, shows that he is willing to be classed among those whose policy was censured by both Plato and Aristotle, for he admits that the poet is "Bound to please, not write well."† This, of course, indicates that he does not worry himself about the ethical value of poetry. By the year 1667 he is beginning to take his work more seriously and to look to the artistic side of poetry with more concern. It was in that year that he published *The Indian Emperor*, a play with which he himself was particularly well pleased. "The story of the Indian Prince," he says in the Dedication of the play, "is, perhaps, the greatest which was ever represented in a poem of this nature,—the action of it including the discovery and conquest of a new world. In it I have neither wholly followed the truth of the history, nor altogether left it; but have taken all the liberty of a poet, to add, to alter, or diminish, as I thought might best conduce to the beautifying of my work; it being not the business of the poet to represent historical truth, but probability."‡ This was the play from which Rymer selected a passage seven years later to show the superiority of Dryden over the poets of France, Italy, and Greece.

* Dryden, *Works*, II., p. 30.

† Ibid., II., p. 141.

‡ Ibid., II., p. 228.

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In the year 1668 Dryden made his first formal admission that it is the business of the poet to instruct. This admission appeared in *A Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poetry being an answer to the Preface of the Great Favourite, or the Duke of Lerma*, which was published with the second edition of the *Indian Emperor*. He acknowledges that he himself endeavors "to please the people," for such "ought to be the poet's aim," but he adds this further remark that "Moral truth is the mistress of the poet as much as of the philosopher; poesy must be ethical."* This *Defence* was preceded in the same year, 1668, by *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy*, to which attention must be called, for the reason that it shows how nearly Dryden understood Aristotle's use of the word purgation in reference to the emotions of pity and fear, and on the other hand how great was his mistake in thinking that Aristotle referred to other emotions. On this point see our discussion of the term *katharsis* at the end of Chapter I. Dryden wrote as follows: "The end of tragedies or serious plays, says Aristotle, is to beget admiration, compassion, or concernment; but are not mirth and compassion things incompatible? And is it not evident that the poet must of necessity destroy the former by intermingling of the latter? That is, he must ruin the sole end and object of his tragedy, to introduce somewhat that is forced in, and is not of the body of it. Would you not think that physician mad, who having prescribed a purge, should immediately order you to take restringents upon it?"† Evidently Dryden realizes that a

* Ibid., II., p. 303. † *Essays*, Ker's Edition, I., p. 58.

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pathological effect is intended by the Aristotelian purgation of the emotions. Such an interpretation is, of course, correct, and agrees with that of Milton whose opinion on the same subject was published three years later, 1671, in the Preface to *Samson Agonistes*.

DRYDEN ACCEPTS THE DOCTRINE OF POETIC JUSTICE.

We now come to that time in Dryden's career when he takes the theory of poetic justice into account. There is no mistaking what he means. He is dealing directly and unequivocally with poetic justice, though he does not use the technical expression, and in this he is considerably in advance of Rymer to whom has been ascribed the distinction of introducing the doctrine into English literary criticism. When Dryden took up the question in the Preface to *An Evenings Love; or the Mock Astrologer*, a comedy, in 1671, Rymer had not thought of translating Rapin's *Reflections*, for the simple reason that they had not been written; and seven years were to elapse before he would at all distinguish himself as an advocate of poetic justice.

Dryden's *Mock Astrologer*—that is the name by which it is usually known—had been acted on the public stage three years before it was printed. It had been subjected to some criticism which Dryden thought to be unfair, and for this reason he wrote a defence in his preface. It seems that the leading characters in the drama were debauched persons, and that, in spite of their wickedness, they suffered no misfortune or punishment for their sins, but on the contrary participated in the happy ending of

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the play. Those who called attention to this feature of the *Monk Astrologer* seemed to base their objection on the principle that it is a law of comedy that virtue should be rewarded and vice should be punished. In answer to this objection Dryden says that he knows "no such law to have been constantly observed in comedy, either by the ancient or modern poets."* He then goes on to cite illustrations in support of his contention. But he does not end the discussion with arguments of this kind; he goes a step farther and accounts for the error of his critics by saying that they made no distinction between the rules of comedy and those of tragedy. "In tragedy," he says, "where the actions and persons are great, and the crimes horrid, the laws of justice are more strictly observed; and examples of punishments to be made, to deter mankind from the pursuit of vice."†

Here we have a very clear and concise enunciation of the doctrine of poetic justice. Nothing in Rymer is more acceptable than this as a declaration in favor of the application of the principle to tragedy. Dryden; it is true, points out instances in which he discovers that the law is violated among the ancients; as for instance the case of Oedipus who was punished for a crime "he knew not he had committed"‡, and Medea who escaped "from punishment after murder"; but these are the only exceptions to the rule which he seems to remember, in consequence of which he admits that such cases "have been rare among the ancient poets." This is, indeed, a remarkable con-

* *Works*, III., p. 246.

† *Ibid.*, III., p. 248.

‡ *Ibid.*

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tribution to literary criticism, not only because it affords us a very striking argument against the proposition that Rymer was the English author of the doctrine of poetic justice, but also because it considers the subject in a more formal way than Rymer ever did or any other critic who wrote on the subject before the famous controversy arose between Dennis and Addison. Before laying this notable document aside, attention is to be called to the fact that Dryden comes to the conclusion, that the end of tragedy is chiefly to instruct, that of comedy to delight.*

In 1672 his disposition to assign to poetry a moral function develops along new lines. In that year he published a new edition of *Tyrannic Love* with a Preface in which he makes this observation: "I considered that pleasure was not the only end of poesy; and that even the instructions of morality were not so wholly the business of a poet, as that the precepts and examples of piety were to be omitted. For to leave that employment altogether to the clergy, were to forget that religion was first taught in verse."† We can notice here that he is departing more from the position he assumed a few years earlier when the instructive office of poetry was almost entirely ignored in his plays. He has now entered the period when he is ready to make an apology if he does not teach a helpful lesson by means of the spectacle presented. He is even ready to defend himself if any one accuses him of violating the law of poetic justice. We have already noted that he made such a defence in 1671. But now, in

* Ibid., III., p. 376.

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1672, he adopts new tactics. He does not plead that the law should not apply to comedy,—he has written a tragedy and endeavors to show that he has not violated the law, his critics to the contrary. He even points out the peculiar construction of his plot whereby he succeeds in having the punishment of the crime of his protagonist “immediately succeed its execution.”* Then, too, he pleads not only for his own play but for the general defence of the doctrine, when he says that if it sometimes happens that a play fails to exhibit an adequate distribution of punishments and rewards, this must not be taken “to be an argument against the art any more than the extravagances and impieties of the pulpit, in the late time of rebellion, can be against the office and dignity of the clergy.”†

In 1678 Dryden makes a very formal act of faith in the ancient masters, as may be discovered in his Preface to *All for Love, or the World Well Lost, A Tragedy*. He had just read Rymer’s discussion of the works of Beaumont and Fletcher, and he seemed to be favorably impressed by the position which was taken by this patron of poetic justice. There appeared to be no doubt in his mind that the Greek models should be followed along the lines which Rymer had pointed out. He admits that he had accepted the practice of the ancients as the standard by which *All for Love* was to be judged.‡ He recognizes specifically the principle that the hero must be neither perfect in virtue nor altogether wicked; and, of course, he studiously avoids any

* Ibid., III., p. 378.

† Ibid., III., p. 377.

‡ Ibid., V., p. 326.

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important violation of the doctrine of poetic justice, as may be observed in the reading of the play.

The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy was published in 1679 as a portion of the Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*. Three of the topics which he discusses in this Preface are worthy of particular mention. The first is the relation which should exist between the ethical and the æsthetical; the second concerns the character of the protagonist in so far as he may be the means of arousing the emotions; the third is his erroneous interpretation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy. In the first place, he holds that the general end of all poetry is to "instruct delightfully."* In this he shows a development of opinion; eleven years earlier he ascribed no ethical value to comedy. Now he makes it the business of all poetry to instruct. His use of the adverb "delightfully" is explained in his own words: "Philosophy," he says, "instructs, but it performs its work by precept; which is not delightful, or not so delightful as example."† The second topic which we pointed out dealt with the means of arousing the emotions. He argues, under this head, that not only should the chief character be so far removed from the realm of real villainy as to be somewhat amiable, in order that the spectators may have some concernment for his sufferings, but also that it is the business of the poet to depend almost wholly on this one character for the effect intended upon the emotion.‡ In this he comes closer to the opinion of Aristotle than did his contemporary Rymer, who made it his

* Ibid., VI., p. 262.

† Ibid.

‡ Ibid., VI., p. 269.

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business to neglect none of the characters of the play, but to see that in so far as possible all should be treated with poetic justice and thus contribute their share to the agitation of the emotions. In discussing the third topic, Dryden falls into an error of interpretation, with Rapin for a guide. The passage in which this error occurs follows closely upon his explanation of the expression, "to instruct delightfully," and contains the implied admission that he accepts the view of Rapin. "To purge the passions by example," he says, "is therefore the particular instruction which belongs to tragedy. Rapin, a judicious critic, has observed from Aristotle, that pride and want of commiseration are the most predominant vices in mankind; therefore to cure us of these two, the inventors of tragedy have chosen to work upon two other passions, which are fear and pity."*

How erroneous is Rapin's interpretation of Aristotle may be realized when one considers that Aristotle did not regard hardness of heart as one of the "predominant vices of mankind," but rather I judge, a virtue to be partially acquired; nor did he propose to strengthen the emotions of pity and fear; nor, again, did he intend that the agitation of these emotions should act as a purgative for the removal of the opposite kind of emotions. Aristotle intended to effect the purgation of these two emotions themselves, as was proved in Chapter I., and in this he probably aimed at the same ultimate end as did his preceptor, Plato, who desired that men should be free from the coward-breeding violence

* Ibid., VI., p. 262.

DRYDEN ACCEPTS THE DOCTRINE

of the emotions of pity and fear, in order to be good citizens.

Evidently this theory which Dryden supported in 1679 is different from that which he advocated in 1668. We have already referred to what he said at that time;* but we must add this reflection, that when he objected to the intermingling of the emotions of admiration and compassion, or, as he also expressed it, mirth and compassion, he did so because he thought that since they were of a contrary nature, one would act upon the other as a restraining upon a purgative. He had not yet discovered that Aristotle named the kindred emotions of pity and fear.

The year 1690 shows Dryden's attempt to surpass the ancient masters in the precise observance of Rymer's theory of poetic justice. Strictly speaking, the theory is not Rymer's, though Dryden refers to him as he would to an authority. Dryden himself, as we have seen,† had accepted all the essentials of the theory years before it was formally defended by Rymer. Moreover, he now attempts to show how he eliminates from his *Don Sebastian* the mistake which he pointed out in the *Oedipus* of Sophocles in 1671. Like Oedipus, his protagonist is guilty of incest, and like Oedipus he committed the offence unknowingly; but unlike Oedipus, he escapes serious misfortune in the conclusion of the play.‡ To put Don Sebastian to death would have been the easiest thing to do; but, as Dryden pointed out, it would

* Loc. cit. p. 122.

† Loc. cit. p. 123.

‡ Blindness and banishment are the punishments which are meted out to the hero in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, death in the *Oedipus Coloneus*.

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have been "the least artful; because, as I have somewhere said, the poison and the dagger are still at hand to butcher a hero when a poet wants the brains to save him."* Arguing further in favor of the disposition which he makes of his protagonist, he points to his innocence, and says "it was unreasonable to have killed him; for the learned Mr. Rymer has well observed, that in all punishments we are to regulate ourselves by poetical justice; and according to those measures, an involunatry sin deserves not death; from whence it follows that to divorce himself from the beloved object, to retire into a desert, and deprive himself of a throne, was the utmost punishment, which a poet could inflict, as it was also the utmost reparation which Sebastian could make."†

This treatment of unintentional crime was a new departure in Dryden's dramatic writings; the subject, however, was not new. He had actually made a tragedy of the famous story of Oedipus in 1679; but he neglected to rectify there the mistake which he pointed out eight years previously in his Preface to the *Mock Astrologer*. Though in 1571 he thought it was against the principle of poetic justice to have Oedipus suffer for a crime of which he was morally innocent, and though he still held to the same opinion in 1690 when he defended his catastrophe in Don Sebastian, it appears somewhat strange that he did not attempt to give us a practical application of his theory when he himself wrote the play which he has called *Oedipus*. There, instead of

* Dryden, *Works*, VII., p. 311.

† Ibid., VII., p. 312.

SUMMARY OF DRYDEN'S VIEWS

following his own approved principle of poetic justice, he heaps misery upon the hero, very much after the manner of Sophocles, and ends the play with the suicidal act of Oedipus.

A SUMMARY OF DRYDEN'S VIEWS.

Here we may begin to bring to a close our account of Dryden's essays in literary criticism. We have not considered them all; neither have we considered any of them completely. It was merely necessary to show in what way his opinions had a bearing upon the ethical functions of poetry. We have shown how there was a development in these opinions, particularly with regard to the question whether or not it is the chief aim of the poet to please. This particular phrase of his theory of poetry shows a sort of irregular development in favor of the ethical view. In 1664 he declares that the poet is "bound to please, not to write well."* In 1668 he declares that "poesy must be ethical."† In 1671 he seems to limit this requirement to tragedy.‡ In 1679 he makes it the business of all poetry to "instruct delightfully."§ In 1692 he expresses his opinion again in an essay on the *Original and Progress of Satire*;|| this time he makes it certain that in his judgment instruction is the only end of poetry, but he maintains that this end can not be realized unless the instruction be given pleasingly. What he says is this: "They who will not grant me, that pleasure is one of the ends of

* Loc. cit. p. 121.

† Loc. cit. p. 122.

‡ Loc. cit. p. 124.

§ Loc. cit. p. 127.

|| Dryden, *Essays*, Ker's Edition, II., p. 112.

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poetry but that it is only a means of compassing the only end, which is instruction, must yet allow, that without the means of pleasure, the instruction is but a bare and dry philosophy.”*

His uncertainty regarding the effect of tragedy upon the emotions has been made apparent. The mistake into which he fell, in thinking that Aristotle considered admiration as one of the emotions proper to tragedy, was the cause of some of this uncertainty, since he could not understand how any intensity of feeling could be produced by contrary emotions in the same play. This difficulty presented itself to his mind in 1668. In 1679 he shows that he understands better what were the emotions to which Aristotle refers, namely, pity and fear,—though he thinks these are a purgative for pride and want of commiseration. The latest of his variations of judgment in regard to this question appears in the *Heads of An Answer to Rymer*, in 1693. This, properly speaking, is not a formal expression of opinion. Dryden did not write for publication, he merely made a few notes on the blank pages of a copy of Rymer's *Tragedies of the Last Age*. The document may be taken, however, as an indication of Dryden's opinions in 1693, and here it is that we find him ready to advance a theory entirely at variance with that of 1668. He no longer finds it difficult to conceive of contrary emotions, and he goes to the other extreme of thinking that it may be the business of tragedy to arouse all the emotions in turn, “as joy, anger, love, fear.”†

This document, called *Heads of An Answer to*

* Ibid.

† Loc. cit. p. 119.

SUMMARY OF DRYDEN'S VIEWS

Rymer, is worthy of more than passing attention, not only because it helps us to form a correct judgment on Dryden's theory of poetry, but also because it throws the searchlight of critical inspection upon Dryden's own contemporary and friend, in whom we are particularly interested, Thomas Rymer. One of the conclusions to be drawn from the document is this, that Dryden indirectly argues against the proposition that Aristotle's idea of tragedy embraced the doctrine of poetic justice. He holds that "if the encouragement of virtue, and discouragement of vice, be the proper ends of poetry in tragedy, pity and terror, though good means, are not the only."* We know, however, that Aristotle was careful to refer only to the emotions of pity and fear, those that Plato mentioned. It seems reasonable, then, to suppose that he was not seeking for such emotions as would produce the moral effect of making men love virtue and hate vice. If the selection of the emotions were to be made for that purpose, why did he not select those other emotions which Dryden maintains will tend to this same end if the spectacle conform to the law of poetic justice?

There is another point which Dryden makes regarding the question of poetic justice. It is this: he believes it possible to make the villain excessively bad without violating the law referred to. He argues that even though Rollo commits many murders, poetic justice will not suffer, because "we stab him in our minds for every offence which he commits."† In this, of course, he differs from

* Dryden, *Works*, XV., p. 383.

† Ibid., XV., p. 387.

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Rymer. Finally, let Dryden declare himself once more in regard to the "ridiculous doctrine," of his contemporary: "the punishment of vice and reward of virtue are the most adequate ends of tragedy."*

RYMER'S FIRST CONTRIBUTION TO LITERARY CRITICISM.

Thomas Rymer was born in 1641, and died in 1713. His education prepared him for the practice of law; but in this field of activity he won no distinction, chiefly for the reason that he felt he had a talent for literary work. Consequently he abandoned his profession as a barrister and devoted his talents to literary criticism and history. His first appearance as an author occurred in the year 1668—the year of the publication of Dryden's *Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poesy*—when he published a translation of a Latin anthology from Cicero's works, and called it *Cicero's Prince*. Next in order came his translation of Rapin's *Reflections on Aristotle's Treatise of Poesie*, published in 1674 with a Preface by the translator. In 1678 he published a drama called *Edgar*, and his famous essay entitled *The Tragedies of the Last Age*. The drama, written to illustrate his idea of tragdey, was republished in 1691 and again in 1692. It was not acted. Addison regarded it as a typical failure.† Besides this he wrote some poetry and a considerable number of volumes dealing with problems of history and archaeology. In 1693 his contributions to literary criticism appear to come to an end with the publication of a work entitled *A Short View of Tragedy*. It is not evident that

* Ibid., XV., p. 390.

† *Spectator*, No. 692.

RYMER'S FIRST CONTRIBUTION

he made any defence against the excoriation which he received from Dryden soon after the publication of the *Short View*.

Let us proceed, then, to an investigation of Rymer's views of tragedy. The preface to his translation of Rapin's *Reflections* is the source to which we must turn for the earliest expression of his doctrines in literary criticism. It can hardly be said that this work is of much value as an illustration of his idea of tragedy. However, it will not be out of place to present a summary of the essay. First of all, he observes that France and Italy are far ahead of England as regards learning;* then, referring to the end of the sixteenth century, he says, "At this time with us many great Wits flourished; but Ben. Johnson, -I think, had all the Critical Learning to himself; and till of late years, England was as free from critics, as it was from Wolves,† that a harmless

* Preface in Rapin's *Works*, II., p. 109.

† The truth of this assertion is quite apparent to any one who investigates the critical work of the first half of the seventeenth century. How to account for this is a problem in itself. During the first three quarters of the sixteenth century poetry had a life and death struggle so far as the drama was concerned; and even after that the poets were somewhat handicapped by the prejudice of Puritanism. In consequence of this and for other reasons, we notice that several writers came forward as defenders of the Art of Poetry. Soon they gained the ascendancy; and the drama achieved immortal triumphs in the work of Shakespeare. In consequence, we observe that the policy of defence was abandoned and the poets rested in apparent security. This tranquility lasted till the time of the Civil War and triumph of Puritanism, as a result of which the theatre was closed, to be reopened again in the time of

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well meaning Book might pass without any danger. But now this Priviledge, whatever extraordinary Talent it requires, is usurped by the most Ignorant: And they who are least acquainted with the Game, are aptest to Bark at everything that comes in their way.”* He then considers Aristotle in the light of a literary dictator and seems to take it as a matter of course that poets should “blindly Resign” to the “Practice of the Ancients” which Aristotle “reduced to principles.”† Next he makes a passing comment on Rapin’s complaint that the English people are “delighted with cruel things,” admitting

* Rapin’s *Works*, II., p. 110. Shortly before the time when Rymer made these remarks, Davenant, Hobbes, Flecknoe, Shadwell, Milton and Dryden had made observations concerning literary art. It is hard to tell whether or not he refers to any of these. Rymer was at the time thirty-three years of age. Davenant was dead six years, Hobbes was eighty-six, Flecknoe was more than fifty, Shadwell was about thirty-two, Milton was sixty-four, and Dryden was forty-three. It is possible that some more obscure writers may have fallen under the lash of his criticism. His language is quite severe to be used in the second paragraph of his first published utterance as a literary critic.

† Ibid., p. 11.

the Restoration. It then happened that the influence of French classicism began to be felt in England, and this in turn contributed its share to the revival of literary criticism. It is also to be remarked that the practice of writing prefaces became popular during this period, and these in themselves constitute a considerable body of critical commentary. Dryden took notice of this innovation and designated it as a borrowing from the French. Such a practice was not popular in the time of Shakespeare, a fact that we have some reason to regret.

RYMER'S FIRST CONTRIBUTION

that "on our stage are more murders than on all the Theatres in Europe," and suggesting that the makers of tragedy try to discover whether the cause rests with themselves in their idea of art or with the people.* Following this, Rymer summarizes Rapin's opinions about the characteristics of language, commenting in sequence on the adaptability of English, Italian, French and German to the uses of poetry.† He then takes up Rapin's conclusions about English writers and offers his own opinions on the subject, praising Spencer as "the first of our Heroick Poets," but complaining that "he wanted a true Idea"‡ and blaming the Italian influence for "Debauching great Spencer's Judgment" by leading him to be guilty of the "Vice of those times" which was "to affect Superstitiously the Allegory."§ Sir William Davenant is the subject of a discussion in which there is both praise and blame; and, by way of parenthesis, it is worth while drawing special attention to this characteristic of Rymer's first work as a critic, since the contrary was the case in his later commentaries on the work of English dramatists. There is hardly a word of praise to be found in all that he said about Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Johnson, Shakespeare, or any of the other great playwrights whom he condescended to notice. So extremely one-sided was his criticism that it has been called brutal. To return to our summary: his remarks on Davenant revealed his partiality for the rhyming couplet and his dislike of the quatrain.|| Cowley receives a bit

* Ibid., p. 112. † Ibid., p. 113. ‡ Ibid., p. 114.

§ Ibid., p. 115.

|| Ibid., p. 117.

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of praise and a proportionate amount of blame; one of Cowley's offences consisted in this, that he chose a subject which on account of its historical character kept him too "strictly ty'd up to the Truth." He then quoted Aristotle against the use of history in poetry.* Cowley was also accused of violating the law which calls for unity of action. Finally, Rymer draws his long preface to a close by instituting a contest in poetry on the description of night. He assembles his contestants from Greece and Italy and France and England. Apollonius Rhodius sings for the Greeks, Virgil for the Latins, Tasso for the Italians, Marino for the French, Dryden for the English.† And Dryden wins the contest. Is it not strange that Dryden should ever be so provoked as to become unfriendly to Rymer? The break in friendship did come, but both men had advanced nineteen years in experience, in judgment, and in the knowledge of each other's faults. This tribute to Dryden was the last item of critical opinion in Rymer's first contribution to literary criticism, and it is probable that it had the effect of making Dryden susceptible in a very special degree to the influence of French classicism of which Rymer was the exponent.

A concluding word may be said in regard to the

* Ibid., p. 118.

† Rymer does not mention Dryden's name or give direct indication of the authorship of his selection. A passage of five lines is quoted from *The Conquest of Mexico*, and the reader of the present day is supposed to know that this is the subtitle of Dryden's play which is called *The Indian Emperor*, and that the verses are to be found at the beginning of Act III., Scene II.

RAPIN'S INFLUENCE ON RYMER

Preface to Rapin's *Reflections*. It is remarkable for this, that it contains no direct critical opinion that might lead us to determine what was Rymer's idea of tragedy. Most of his observations are based upon a somewhat unscientific conception of heroic poetry in general. He has not yet reached, in his development as a critic, that stage which shows him to be a confirmed fault-finder. He has entered a period of formation, he has made himself somewhat familiar with what the French think of poetry, and he needs time to apply their principles to the English drama. Rapin's *Reflections* were to help him towards some independence of thought, the evidence of which he was to exhibit to the world. Rapin's *Reflections* were to have an influence also upon Dryden. For these two reasons it is quite proper that we analyze these *Reflections* before proceeding to the discussion of Rymer's *Tragedies of the Last Age*. We can really regard the *Reflections* as embodying Rymer's critical opinions at the time, for we have his commentary on them in the form of a preface—the contents of which have been set forth—and, with that as a guide, we can determine to what extent he took exception to the French exposition of matters pertaining to poetry.

RAPIN'S INFLUENCE ON RYMER.

René Rapin, French Jesuit, a theologian and littérateur, was in some respects a contemporary of Rymer. He was, however, more properly a contemporary of Milton, for he was born at Tours in 1612 and died at Paris in 1678. Taine mentions

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him in his *History of English Literature** as one of those who influenced Dryden, and Taine's translator refers to him as a critic who is "completely forgotten."† Many of the histories of French literature neglect to give any account of him. Nevertheless, as we shall see, he exercised a considerable influence upon English literature in his own life-time. This influence was felt not only in the critical writing of Rymer, Dennis, Gildon and Dryden, but also in Dryden's plays. It is true, however, that other French influences were also at work in much the same direction; for, as Taine observes, Dryden was familiar with the writings of Corneille, Racine, Boileau and Bossu.‡

The *Reflections on Aristotle's Poesie* were first published by the author in 1674, and in the same year they were translated into English by Rymer. The work is divided into two sections, one of which treats the subject in general, the other in particular. In Rapin's generalizations on Aristotle the first thing that strikes us is the importance which he attaches to the theory that the drama must serve a useful purpose. This, it may be observed, has a direct bearing upon the theory of poetic justice. It is true that poetic justice is that principle of dramatic art which calls for a proper distribution of rewards and punishments within the action of the play, and that it is a question among critics whether a moral effect can be produced by any drama which ignores this principle. The advocates of the principle of poetic justice at the end of the seventeenth

* Taine, *History of English Literature*, II., p. 3.

† Ibid.

‡ Ibid.

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century and the beginning of the eighteenth seem to be one of the opinion that the moral effect is produced only by means of a strict distribution of rewards and punishments. And inasmuch as this was the opinion they held, we are justified in presuming that any effort of contemporaneous critics to ascribe to the drama the office of a teacher of morality might be easily construed by them to be an argument in their favor. Those who were opposed to the doctrine of poetic justice were at liberty to start with the proposition that it is the chief function of poetry to please, and they might so interpret Aristotle as to have his opinion give weight to theirs. They might be wrong in making such an interpretation of the language of the Greek master, and they would be told they were wrong. They would be told that Aristotle gave to poetry an ethical function and that the question of giving pleasure was secondary. That such a thing was possible may be gathered from Chapter VII. of Rapin's generalizations on the Poetics. "The Interpreters of Aristotle," he says, "differ in their Opinions. Some will have the End to be Delight, and that 'tis on this Account it labours to move the Passions, all whose motions are Delightful, because nothing is more sweet to the Soul than Agitation; it pleases it self in changing the Objects, to satisfy the Immensity of its Desires. 'Tis true, Delight is the end Poetry aims at, but not the principal End, as others pretend. In effects, Poetry being an Art, ought to be profitable by the quality of its own nature, and by the essential Subordination that all Arts should have to Polity, whose end in general is the public Good. This is the Judgment

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of Aristotle, and of Horace his chief Interpreter.”*

The foregoing passage has been quoted not only to show that Rapin was aware of certain disagreements among the interpreters of Aristotle, but also to show the first-step in his progress towards a declaration touching very clearly on the doctrine of poetic justice. This first step and the others that follow it may be indicated by certain propositions which illustrate Rapin's line of argument. First, he explains in substance the disagreement of the critics in their interpretation of Aristotle.† He then indicates that he himself regards the conservation of the public good as the chief end of poetry.‡ At the same time he holds that it is the design of poetry to delight§, modifying his statement by asserting again that “the principal end of Poesie is to profit”|| and assuring us that “For no other end is Poetry delightful than that it may be Profitable.”¶ Here he attempts to show how this profitable effect may be produced. Two things are to be considered, namely, the manner of instruction and the matter of instruction. With regard to the first he shows that since man's nature does not readily submit to the precepts of morality, an effort must be made to overcome this difficulty by means similar to those used by a physician who mingles “Honey

* Rapin, II., p. 141. To say that Horace was the chief interpreter of Aristotle is to go a step too far. A considerable body of literary criticism had grown up between the time of Aristotle and Horace, and it is a question whether or not Horace was at all acquainted with the *Poetics* of Aristotle.

† Ibid., p. 141.

‡ Ibid.

§ Ibid.

|| Ibid., p. 142.

¶ Ibid., p. 143.

RAPIN'S INFLUENCE ON RYMER

with the mediciné, to take of the Bitterness";* in other words, the poet must make the dose pleasant. Moreover, he asserts that the poet can not produce the desired moral effect unless his own morals are pure,—“the Muses of true Poets are as chaste as Vestals.”

It is clear, therefore, that there must be a moral lesson and that this lesson must be presented in a pleasing manner by a worthy teacher. Rapin next proceeds to show what that lesson should be. It is unquestionably a lesson which illustrates the doctrine of poetic justice as it was advocated by Rymer four years later. The passage is, for this reason, so important that it should be quoted. Rapin writes as follows: “All Poetry, when 'tis perfect, ought of necessity to be a public Lesson of good Manners, for the Instruction of the World. Heroick Poesie proposes the Examples of great Vertues and great Vices, to excite Men to abhor these, and to be in love with the other: It gives us an Esteem for Achilles in Homer, and Contempt for Thersites: it begets in us a Veneration for the Piety of Aeneas in Virgil, and Horror for the Profaneness of Mezentius. Tragedy rectifies the use of Passions, by moderating our Fear, and our Pity, which are Obstacles of Virtue; it lets men see that Vice never escapes Unpunished, when it represents Ægysthus in the Electra of Sophocles, punished after the Ten years Enjoyment of his Crime. It teaches us, that the Favours of Fortune, and the Grandeurs of the World, are not always true Goods, when it shews on the Theatre, a Queen so unhappy as Hecuba deploring

* Ibid.

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with that Pathetic Air her Misfortunes in Euripides. Comedy, which is an Image of common Conversation, corrects the publick Vices, by letting us see how ridiculous they are in particular.”*

Just here it is well to call to mind what was the conception of poetic justice a few years later when Dennis told Addison who it was that originated the doctrine. Ascribing the authorship of the doctrine to Aristotle, he based his opinion on a passage in the *Poetics* which speaks of “a catastrophe favorable to the Good and fatal to the Wicked.”† Addison understood what was meant by the doctrine before waiting for his opponent’s explanation, for he had described it as a current law of the drama that required tragedy writers to free the good from their troubles and punish the wicked for their wrongdoing before bringing their plays to an end.‡ Such was the idea of poetic justice thirty-seven years after the time when Rymer translated Rapin’s *Reflections*, and it does not seem that the idea had changed much in that time. It had received the distinction of a name in 1678 when Rymer used it as a principle of criticism in *The Tragedies of the Last Age*, but the doctrine was not new to him, neither did he argue as one who thought that Beaumont, Fletcher, Jonson or Shakespeare were to be excused for ignorance of such a law. He did not take to himself the credit of discovering the law, nor did he assert that literary criticism in England had not yet come to the knowledge that such a law existed. He merely took the dramatists to

* Ibid., pp. 143-144.

† Loc. cit. p. 5.

‡ Loc. cit. p. 2.

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task, and he pursued that task with a vigor that verged on ferocity. He certainly regarded their errors as unpardonable, though their writings had been produced a hundred years before his time. It is not surprising, therefore, that Rymer should take Rapin's remarks on poetic justice as a matter of course and not point in particular to the above-quoted passage in the *Reflections* as his authority for a new and wonderful doctrine.

Rapin argued for poetic justice in tragedy, and his argument, as we see, became a part of English literary criticism, by adoption, in the year 1674. What Dennis meant when he said that Rymer was the first who introduced the doctrine into our language,* or what Professor Lounsbury meant when he reached the same conclusion†, I am not prepared to say; but what they should have meant is this, that if it may be in any way imputed to Rymer that he introduced the doctrine of poetic justice into English Literature, such imputability originated when he published his translation of Rapin's *Reflection on Aristotle's Poesie*. This work may have been the first in which Rymer found an expression of the doctrine. Rapin knew the principle of dramatic art which has been called poetic justice, and took occasion to show how effective it was in Greek tragedy. He says distinctly of tragedy, in the very first sentence that deals with tragedy by name: "it lets men see that Vice never escapes Unpunished."‡

It must be admitted, however, that Rapin did not take as narrow a view of poetic justice as

* Loc. cit. p. 64.

† Loc. cit. p. 65.

‡ Loc. cit. p. 143

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was taken by Rymer, Dennis and other extremists. Among these may be mentioned the American Commentator on Shakespeare, Denton J. Snider, who argues that Desdemona suffers death in *Othello* because she was a wicked woman, inasmuch as she committed the offence of marrying one who was not of her race.* It is probable that Rapin did not think Desdemona had committed a crime for which death should be the penalty, and at the same time it is not likely that he regarded her death as a violation of the doctrine of poetic justice. We must remember that according to his philosophy of life, "the Favours of Fortune, and the Grandeurs of the World, are not always true Goods,"† and on this principle he approves of the misfortunes of Hecuba. From this it can be argued that Virtue and Innocence are not treated with poetic injustice when they sometimes suffer misfortune, and even death, and that the law of poetic justice is more effectively and artistically conserved and illustrated by such a catastrophe if it can be shown that the unfortunate and unhappy are actually rewarded, not by the "favours of fortune" but by the "true Good." Such a method of reasoning has not been overlooked by critics who see poetic beauty in Desdemona's death and Cordelia's death and in the tragic sufferings of some other Shakespearean characters; and, as a matter of fact, this line of defence has proved to be the more popular among the admirers of Shakespeare. For us the important observation to make is this, that one

* Snider, *The Shakespearean Drama*. The Tragedies, pp. 88-89.

† Loc. cit. p. 143.

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may consider the death of Desdemona as an example of poetic justice whether we believe, with Snider, that her death was a fit punishment for the crime she had committed, or maintain, with Rapin's *Reflections* to guide us, that her death was a real blessing, a reward in disguise.

Having set forth for consideration that passage which shows Rapin to be acquainted with the idea embraced by the expression, poetic justice, and having pointed out how nicely he provides for such exceptional cases as those cited from the plays of Shakespeare, we may now review the remaining part of the *Reflections* briefly and rapidly. It will not be necessary to mention all the topics he treats; a few of the more important ones will be sufficient. Rapin argues that since the action must be probable, the Unities of Time, Place and Action must be observed,* that fable must be used instead of historical truth,† that it is the business of tragedy to make man proof against excessive fear and excessive pity,‡ that modern tragedy has attempted to deal with other emotions,§ such as love and tenderness,|| but without success; for these tragedies do not make an admirable impression as did those of Sophocles and Euripides, and, at best, they last only a year or two.¶

These are the leading features of the theory of poetry that was set forth by Rapin in his *Reflections on Aristotle's Poesie*. Some are more interesting than others, because of the effect which they produced on literary criticism in England for nearly half a

* Rapin, II., p. 146.

† Ibid., p. 205.

‡ Ibid., 210.

† Ibid., p. 156.

§ Ibid., p. 209.

¶ Ibid., p. 211.

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century. Here and there in Dryden, for instance, are evidences of such effect. In his *Heads of an Answer to Rymer*, Dryden discusses the question of adding, to the emotions of pity and fear, others such as love and anger; but this opinion was advanced so long after the publication of the *Reflections* that one can only surmise that Rapin's opinions had set Dryden thinking. It is unnecessary to follow this and other similar conjectures to any further issue, for such would not serve the purpose of this investigation. A study of the kind would be of value in a way, and interesting too, if it might account to any considerable extent for the development of Dryden's idea of the drama.

"THE TRAGEDIES OF THE LAST AGE."

Let us turn again to Rymer. He had translated Rapin and had produced a critical preface which showed to what extent he disagreed with the author of the *Reflections*. He did not disagree with him in any important particular. He accepted French classicism substantially as he found it in Rapin,* and allowed its influence to work upon him quietly for four years. The result was, that he formulated for himself a theory of dramatic art that made the best playwrights of English literature the laughing stock and the butt of ridicule of all his devoted

* Rymer did not depend entirely on Rapin for his knowledge of French tendencies in literature. His acquaintance with the French language made it possible for him to read the works of all those French critics and poets who were likely to preach and practice whatever was new in literary development.

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disciples. How numerous these disciples were, can be gathered from the fact that they did not clamor for the production of Rymer's *Edgar*, though it was written to illustrate the practicability of all the rules of tragedy for the violation of which he blamed Shakespeare and the rest. He published the play three times, but it was not acted.

Let us see, then, what are the characteristics of his idea of tragedy in the year 1678, when he first published *The Tragedies of the Last Age*. The first thing to be observed is the fact that the work contains a sort of index in which the phrase, poetical justice, is listed with five page-references. Here we have the first use of the phrase which English literary criticism has to offer. The Index is called "The Contents," and follows the title page.* In this index are gathered together alphabetically the propositions which most strikingly illustrate Rymer's idea of Tragedy. A summary of these propositions will be sufficient for our present purpose. Unity of action, he says, is necessary, and where this is observed, "the Poet can not easily transgress in the unities of time and place—Historical and accidental truths will not do in Tragedy—Kings can not be accessory to a crime—Man's life not to be taken away without a just account—Poets must take care that the Criminal sin not too far, and are not to be trusted for an Hell behind the scenes—Wilful murder not to be suffer'd in Tragedy."

So much for "The Contents" of the book; let

* I have not been able to consult the first edition, but presume that the edition of 1692 is a faithful copy of the first, as far as the Index is concerned.

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us look to his explanation of poetic justice. Referring to the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, he says that they taught by examples, "And, finding in History, the same end happen to the righteous and to the unjust, virtue often opprest, and wickedness on the Throne; they saw these particular yesterday-truths were imperfect and improper to illustrate the universal and eternal truths by them intended. Finding also that this unequal distribution of rewards and punishments did perplex the wisest, and by the atheist was made a scandal to the Divine Providence. They concluded that a Poet must, of necessity see justice exactly administered, if he intended to please."* The outstanding fact in these words of Rymer is something else than a mere insistence on the necessity of poetic justice. He has already come to the conclusion that poetic justice is an essential requirement of the drama, and he proposes to make a good impression at the start by presenting his line of argument before drawing the conclusion. It is important to observe what are the points in his argument. First of all, he notes that Sophocles and Euripides objected to the use of historical truths in poetry because these truths sometimes represent the oppression of virtue and the exaltation of the wicked,—so Rymer presumes that Sophocles and Euripides were in favor of the idea represented by poetic justice. Again, the English critic ascribes to the Greek writers of tragedy the intention of making universal and eternal truths rather than common every-day truths subserve the ends of poetry,—consequently their idea of poetry would be the direct opposite of that

* Rymer, *The Last Age*, p. 14.

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which men like Dr. Johnson admire when they praise Shakespeare because he holds the mirror up to nature. And once more, Rymer makes Sophocles and Euripides object to any violation of the law of poetic justice on the grounds that the wisest are perplexed by such an exhibition of incongruity, and that the atheist uses it as an argument against divine providence.

Herein has been set forth Rymer's first discussion of the famous doctrine. He has barely taken time to complete his introduction, when he makes a very rapid survey of the beginnings of dramatic art, only to show that the ethical value of the drama was first recognized by Sophocles and Euripides; and, going a step farther, he seems to regard this as the all-important characteristic of their writings. He is evidently of the opinion that the practice of poetic justice originated with them and that the writers of English tragedy made a great mistake when they ignored this practice of the ancients. The theory of dramatic art which he thus ascribed to Sophocles and Euripides became the guiding principle by which he proposed to pass judgment upon certain plays that had been produced in the golden age of English Literature. He did not call it the golden age, though Shakespeare was among the men whom he criticized. He did not have a good word to say of any of them unless by comparison, when, at the end of the book, he says of Ben Jonson's play, "Let me only anticipate a little in behalf of the Catiline, and now tell my thoughts that though the contrivance and economy is faulty enough, yet we there find (besides what is borrowed from others) more of Poetry and of Good thought, more of Nature and of

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Tragedy, then peradventure can be scrap't together from all those other plays."* What he thought of Shakespeare is set forth near the end of his next book of literary criticism, *A Short View of Tragedy*, the first edition of which bears the date of 1693. His opinion about Shakespeare is there delivered in the following words: "Shakespeare's genius lay for Comedy and Humor. In Tragedy he appears quite out of his element; and he raves and rambles, without any coherence, any spark of reason, or any rule to control him, or set bounds to his phrenzy."† It is scarcely to be wondered at that the admirers of Shakespeare should speak in terms of contempt in their appreciation of Rymer as a critic. Dr. Johnson says his criticism exhibits "the ferocity of a tyrant,"‡ but he admired him in other respects and approved of his doctrine of poetic justice. William Warburton comes to Shakespeare's defence in the following words: "In the Neighing of a Horse (says Rymer), or in the Growling of a Mastiff, there is a meaning, there is a lively expression, and, may I say, more Humanity than many times in the tragical Flights of Shakespeare. The Ignorance of which censure is of a Piece with its Brutality."§ It is an interesting fact that Dryden could overlook the attack upon Shakespeare so long as his own dramas were not harshly criticized. In 1679 he referred to Rymer

* Ibid., p. 143.

† Rymer, *A Short View of Tragedy*, p. 156.

‡ S. Johnson, in *Lives of the Poets*, p. 303, in vol. 7 of Works, London, 1825.

§ D. N. Smith, *Eighteenth Century Essays on Shakespeare*, p. 103.

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as "My friend"* and accepted his judgments, saying, "How defective Shakespeare and Fletcher have been in all their plays, Mr. Rymer has discovered in his criticisms: neither can we, who follow them, be excused from the same or greater errors."† In 1690 he speaks of him as "the learned Mr. Rymer;"‡ but in 1693 he turns against him in the Preface to the *Miscellany* in which he takes exception to the critical opinions of Scaliger and others, and then attacks Rymer in the following fashion: "But there is another sort of insects," he writes, "more venomous than the former; those who manifestly aim at the destruction of our poetical church and state; who allow nothing to their countrymen, either of this or of the former age.—Peace be to the venerable shades of Shakespeare and Ben Johnson!—I think I shall be able to defend myself—I leave the world to judge, who gave the provocation."|| This is merely an illustration of the regard in which Rymer was held by critics. Dryden, it may be remarked, so modified those unfriendly views that we find him

* Dryden, *Works*, Scott-Saintsbury Edition, vol. VI., p. 258.

† Ibid., p. 264. Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*.

‡ Ibid., Vol. VII., p. 312. Preface to *Don Sebastian*.

|| Preface to the *Third Miscellany*, Vol. II., pp. 5-6, Ker Edition. This bitter attack on Rymer was occasioned by certain insinuations contained in the last sentence of the Epistle Dedicatory that was published with the *Short View of Tragedy* in 1693. Here is the objectionable passage: "Three, indeed, of the Epick (the two by Homer and Virgil's Aeneids) are reckon'd in the degree of Perfection; But amongst the Tragedies only the Oedipus of Sophocles. That, by Corneille, and by others of a Modern Cut, quantum mutatus!"

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referring at the end of his life to "our learned Mr. Rymer."*

Poetic justice, then, was the predominating principle of Criticism in *The Tragedies of the Last Age*. Tried by this principle, *Rollo*, *A King and no King*, and the *Maids Tragedy*, all by Beaumont and Fletcher, failed miserably. It was originally Rymer's intention to treat Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Julius Cæsar*, as also Ben Jonson's *Catiline*, in the same manner; but finding that the discussion of the works of Beaumont and Fletcher was sufficient to make a volume by itself,† he paused in his enterprise, with the intention of completing it later.‡

* Preface to the *Fables*, Ker, II. p. 249. I am somewhat at a loss to understand how it was that Dryden, who professedly disregarded some principles of literary art in order to give the people what they wanted, had not taken personal offence at the following words which Rymer used in *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (p. 5). "Amongst those who will be objecting against the doctrine I lay down may per-adventure appear a sort of men who have remember'd so and so; and value themselves upon their experience. I may write by the Book (say they) what I have a mind, but they know what will please. These are a Kind of Stage-quacks and Empiricks in Poetry, who have got a Receipt to please." Dryden had more than once declared himself in regard to this matter: He had done it in the Prologue to the *Rival-Ladies* in 1664, admitting that he was "bound to please, not write well," and again in 1668, in *A Defence of an Essay of Dramatic Poetry*, in which he said; "To please the people ought to be the poet's aim, because plays are made for their delight; but it does not always follow that they are pleased with good plays, or that the plays which please are always good."

† *Last Age*, p. 141.

‡ Ibid.

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The second part of the work was never written.

Considered as a whole, *The Tragedies of the Last Age* is an argument for poetic justice by example and by reason. Here and there throughout the book an effort is made not only to show how Beaumont and Fletcher failed to observe this principle, but also to illustrate the method by which the mistake could be rectified. Such an illustration he makes in his discussion of *Rollo*. He gives a reconstruction of the play, which results in showing how the hero to whom the throne of the kingdom rightfully belongs, loses it through the treachery of an ungrateful villain, by whom it is left as an inheritance to his sons, and afterwards regains it through the death of these two sons. The problem of poetic justice concerns these two sons in the matter of their guilt and the manner of their death. They are guilty because their father was guilty and they have succeeded him on the throne. They are innocent to a sufficient degree to be objects of pity in the catastrophe. They are, therefore, neither excessively good nor excessively bad. They must be punished,—Rymer takes that as a matter of course. They must die,—he takes that as a matter of course. How shall they die? Each by the hands of the other. That is the poetical way; for, I infer, such a death would represent a sort of reflex of crime working against itself; the father through one of his sons would avenge his own crime by killing the other son. Their death would be poetical for the additional reason that it would indicate the mysterious workings of divine Providence. Their comparative innocence would make them objects of compassion, but they

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must not be entirely innocent, for "Then no Poetical Justice could have touched them: guilty they were to be, in enjoying their Father's crime; but not of committing any new."*

That is the way in which Rymer illustrates his doctrine of poetic justice. His argument in favor of the conclusion that may be drawn from such an illustration should be set forth in his own words, particularly since the passage contains certain expressions that struck the fancy of his contemporaries. His argument is as follows: "The Poets consider'd, that naturally men were affected with pitty, when they saw others suffer more than their fault deserved; and vice, they thought, could never be painted too ugly and frightful; therefore, whether they would move pitty, or make vice detested, it concern'd them to be somewhat of the severest in the punishments they inflicted. Now, because their hands were tied, that they could not punish beyond such a degree; they were obliged to have a strict eye on their Malefactor, that he transgress not too far, that he committed not two crimes, when but responsible for one: nor, indeed, be so far guilty, as by the Law to deserve death. For though historical Justice might rest there; yet poetical Justice could not be so content. It would require that the satisfaction be complete and full, e're the Malefactor goes off the Stage and nothing left to

* Ibid., p. 23. "Rymer's elaborate directions for removing the Romantic offence of this play, and adjusting it to classical correctness and decorum are among the most involuntary funny things in Criticism." Saintsbury, in *A History of Criticism*, II., p. 394.

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God Almighty, and another world. Nor will it suffer that the Spectators trust the Poet for a Hell behind the scenes; the fire must roar in the conscience of the Criminal, the fiends and furies be conjured up to their faces, with a world of machine and horrid spectacles; and yet the Criminal could never move pitty. Therefore amongst the Ancients we find no Malefactors of this kind; a wilful Murderer is with them as strange and unknown, as a Parricide to the old Roman. Yet need we not fancy that they were squeamish, or unacquainted with any of these great lumping crimes of that age; when we remember their Oedipus, Orestes, or Medea. But they took care to wash the Viper, to cleanse away the venom, and with such art to prepare the morsel: they made it all Junket to the tast, and all Physick in the operation."*

In several respects the passage just quoted is deserving of commentary. One point in particular, that should be noted, is the comparison which Rymer makes between historical justice and poetic justice. Elsewhere he explains this distinction more fully. Poetry, he holds, is more severe than the law in searching for faults in the conduct of men. Poetry will convict them of crime where the law will declare them free. Poetry will punish them, where the law will acquit them. To illustrate this, he cites the case of Orestes, saying that the poets haunted him with the furies in spite of the fact that the Areopagus judged him innocent of crime. He also cites the case of *Œdipus* upon whom the poet heaped misery and misfortune, while the "Casuist excus'd his

* *Last Age*, pp. 25-27.

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invincible ignorance.”* With the same principle in mind, namely, that poetry regards as a crime that which the law may excuse, he makes the point that a due punishment cannot be inflicted on the villain unless the degree of his guilt is kept within moderation. If it is poetic justice to inflict such punishments on Orestes and Oedipus, what kind of justice would it be to inflict these same punishments upon them if they had been guilty in the fullest sense before the law? What kind of justice could be had, if they were morally guilty not only of the crimes with which they are charged but also of other crimes, serious in their nature, and excessive in number? Rymer does not make his inquiry in this fashion, but he offers a solution of the difficulty here proposed. He does not think, for instance, that Beaumont and Fletcher have used the plot of *Rollo* in such a way as to make poetic justice possible. “We see then Rollo,” he says, “fighting with his own Brother and King, equal to himself, and attempting to poyson him, without any remorse; killing him in their mothers arms, without any provocation; calling the Queen their Mother Belldam, and with drawn sword threatning to kill both her and his Sister, without any sense of honour or piety; and must we not imagine a Legion of Devils in his belly? When Rollo has murder’d his Brother, he stands condemn’d by the Laws of Poetry; and nothing remains but that the Poet see him executed, and the Poet is to answer for all the mischief committed afterwards. But Rollo we find has made his escape, and wo be to the Chancellor, to the Schoolmaster, and the

* Ibid., p. 25.

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Chancellors Man; for those are to be men of this world no longer. Here is like to be Poetical Justice, so many lives taken away, and but the life of one guilty person to answer for all."*

Rymer felt, of course, that he has a strong case. He knew that Aristotle objected to characters of excessive badness as well as to characters of perfect goodness. The authority of Aristotle gave him courage to advocate his principle boldly. Moreover, he was aware that a large portion of the literary criticism that had been produced in England before his time had been directed against the drama because it actually depicted criminal conduct. There had been at times too much suggestion of sensuality in the drama, a fault for which the plays of Fletcher were condemned by Fleckno;† there was also a disposition among English playwrights to depict scenes of blood to a degree of excess which was noted by Rapin in his *Reflections*.‡ In excesses of this kind, there was nothing artistic, thought Rymer, nothing poetical, and very little chance for an exact distribution of justice.

The fact that Rymer allowed for "no hell behind the scenes," making it necessary that the criminal should receive his punishment in full before the play ended, was another argument against excessive guiltiness. When such excess actually occurred in the real world outside, the capital punishment inflicted by the state did not constitute the entire punishment which the offender was to suffer.

* Ibid., p. 37.

† Spingarn, *Critical Essays*, II., p. 94.

‡ *Last Age*, p. 24.

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For him there still was the torment of the life hereafter. Since, therefore, this latter kind of punishment could not be exhibited in the play, a corresponding amount of wickedness ought to be eliminated from the character that was to suffer. If the protagonist is to cause the death of another, the act must be so modified that it can not be classed as wilful murder. If the crime is to be such an offence as that which Oedipus committed, it must be done blindly. If Rollo and Otto, brothers in the play which goes by the name of the first, must kill each other, as Rymer suggests by way of revision, they must "unavoidably clash against each other; whilst their proper inclination in vain strives against the violence."* Crime can be punished only to a limited extent on the stage, and if the offender is made excessively wicked, it will be impossible for the dramatist to put in practice the law of poetic justice. Likewise there could be no poetic justice if the characters were all perfectly good.

It is clear, then, that Aristotle's objection against excessive vice and perfect virtue in the drama is also vigorously supported by Rymer,—but for a special reason; he sees in it an argument for poetic justice. Dryden, who published his preface to *All for Love, or the World Well Lost, A Tragedy*, in the same year that Rymer published the opinions above attributed to him, touches the same problem, but in a manner more in keeping with the language and meaning of Aristotle; he says, "All reasonable men have long since concluded, that the hero of the poem ought not to be a character of perfect virtue, for

* *Last Age*, p. 24.

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then he could not, without injustice, be made unhappy; nor yet altogether wicked, because he could not then be pitied."* There is here, also, a suggestion of the dogma of poetic justice as may be noted in the use of the word 'injustice;' but the more important suggestion is contained in the word, 'pitied.' Dryden is thinking of Aristotle's definition of tragedy and bases his objection on that part of the definition which calls for a purgation of the emotions of pity and fear. At any rate, Dryden holds that the suffering hero should be virtuous enough to be pitied in his sufferings. Even here we can follow Dryden a step farther to show that his opinion might not be in conflict with that of Rymer; for the arousing of pity is accomplished by punishing the hero more than he deserves according to standards of civil law,—and such is the thing that Rymer calls poetic justice.

That vice is not to be depicted unless in such a way as to create a sense of pity or terror, is clearly the opinion, not only of Dryden, but also of Rymer. The discussion of *Rollo* was largely concerned with an exposition of the doctrine of poetic justice; this is followed by a discussion of *A King and no King*, another of the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher. In this case Rymer drops the question of poetic justice; but not entirely. His most important observations concerning the play show that the principle of poetic justice is for him a basic principle,—at times even the very expressions he uses refer clearly to the principle itself. Such is the case, for instance, when he says, "We are to presume the

* Dryden, *Works*, V., p. 326.

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greatest virtues, where we find the highest of rewards.”* In this case, our attention is called to the fact, not merely that virtue should be rewarded, but that reward should be in exact proportion to the merit.

That the hero should not be altogether wicked is the principal theme in Rymēr's analysis of *A King and no King*. He holds that the criminal act of the hero must be portrayed in such colors and surrounded by such circumstances that its enormity may not prevent the spectator from pitying him in his sufferings. He observes that in the writing of the ancients “Orestes kill'd his Mother, Hercules his wife and Children, Agamenmon his Daughter”; but he shows in what way these crimes lose the quality of malice, for he describes the first as an act of justice, the second as an act of frenzy, and the last an act of religion. “These,” he says, “were all Tragedies unhappy in the catastrophe. And the business so well prepared, that every one might see, that these worthies had rather have laid violent hands on themselves, had not their will and choice been over-rul'd. Every step they made, appear'd so contrary to their inclinations, as all the while shew'd them unhappy, and render'd them the most deserving of pity in the World.”† By calling attention to the way in which the subject of murder was treated in classical antiquity, Rymer affords an argument for one of his objections to *A King and No King*. Another of his objections he sustains, by showing how the masters treated incestuous love,

* Rymer, *Last Age*, p. 61.

† Ibid., pp. 74-75.

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taking "it in the fall as it rowls down headlong to desperation and misery."*

In the third part of *The Tragedies of the Last Age*, Rymer, in discussing the *Maids Tragedy*, lays down a set of rules that are remarkable for the narrowness they display. One of these is that a man shall not be killed by a woman, a master by his servant, or a King by his subject, neither can the reverse of these actions take place. "Poetical decency," he says, "will not suffer death to be dealt to each other by such persons, whom the Laws of Duel allow not to enter the lists together."† He makes a distinction between epic poetry and tragedy to the effect that whereas enemies may kill one another in the former, "In Tragedy all the clashing is amongst friends, no panegyrick is designed, nor ought intended but pitty and terror: and consequently no shadow of sense can be pretended for bringing any wicked persons on the Stage."‡ But he can not set forth his conclusions, drawn from a study of *A King and No King*, without asserting in favor of poetic justice, that "Poetry will not permit an affront, where there can be no reparation," and arguing that the King and Amintor should be made to kill each other; for "then poetical Justice might have had its course, though no way could pity be due to either of them."§

Rymer's opinion about the three plays which he criticized in *The Tragedies of the Last Age* is summarized in the assertion that they contain "Monsters enough for one Bartholomew-fair."|| In

* Ibid., p. 76.

† Ibid., p. 117.

‡ Ibid., p. 120.

§ Ibid., p. 126.

|| Ibid., p. 142.

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other words, he has come to the conclusion that the wickedness of the characters depicted by Beaumont and Fletcher is out of proportion with any punishment which it is in the province of tragedy to inflict; therefore, it is impossible that in these cases the law of poetic justice should be observed. The fault does not seem, in his judgment to be peculiar to these two writers alone; rather does it seem that the fault is general and that it is to be accounted for by the fact that the poets of England neglected the study of Aristotle.

RYMER'S CRITICISM OF SHAKESPEARE.

A Short View of Tragedy was Rymer's next work in literary criticism. What appears to be the first edition bears the date 1693; nevertheless the book was published in 1692, as appears evident from the fact that in December of that year it was reviewed by Motteux in the *Gentleman's Journal*. This work is by no means so important as its predecessor. In Chapter I. the author presents the outline of an ideal tragedy dealing with "the memorable Adventure of the Spaniards in 88 against England"* and suggests that "Mr. Dryden might try his Pen on this Subject."† Chapter II. is largely devoted to an attempt to describe the function of poetry. "In the days of Aristophanes," he says, "it was on all hands agreed, that the best Poet was he who had done the most to make men vertuous and serviceable to the Publick."‡ The next chapter sets forth the hostile attitude of Christian Rome to plays and

* Rymer, *Short View*, p. 13.

† Ibid., 17.

‡ Ibid., 21.

RYMER'S CRITICISM OF SHAKESPEARE.

players. In the same chapter he mentions other objections that arose in Plato's time, and some that prevailed in England. Chapter V. is devoted to the history of poetry in Italy, France and England. In Chapter VI. he gives further consideration to the history of English poetry. Chapter VII. consists chiefly of a tirade against Shakespeare, with *Othello* as a horrible example. In the next chapter, the last, a further attack is made on Shakespeare because of the mistakes which occur in *Julius Cæsar*.

To classify Rymer's objections to these two plays of Shakespeare would be in itself a difficult task. He follows the plays with a running commentary that makes note of an endless variety of errors,—there is not a word of praise. To illustrate: he quotes Desdemona's "O good Iago, What shall I do to win my Lord again?" and sneeringly remarks, "No Woman bred out of a Pig-stye, could talk so meanly."*

Poetic Justice is dealt with only in a passing way in the *Short View*. Certain passages, however, have a bearing upon the doctrine. That which Denton J. Snider regards as the crime for which Desdemona must be punished is pointed out by Rymer as part of her punishment for some unknown offence. He does not think she has done a wrong for which she can be punished. Snider thought that she committed a crime when she married a man not of her race;† Rymer thinks that the marriage itself is a calamity, a sort of punishment, but he does not know the crime which preceded it. "We may ask here," he says, "what unnatural crime Desdemona, or her Parents had committed, to bring this

* Ibid, 131.

† Loc. cit. p. 146.

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Judgment down upon her; to Wed a Black-amoor, and innocent to be thus cruelly murder'd by him. What instruction can we make out of this Catastrophe? Or whither must our reflection lead us? Is not this to envenome and sour our spirits, to make us repine and grumble at Providence; And the government of the World? If this be our end, what boots it to be vertuous?"*. The end of the play strikes Rymer as a horrible example of "blood and butchery;"† then, too, it exhibits a wholesale violation of the law of poetic justice, for he says, "Our Poet against all Justice and Reason, against all Law, Humanity and Nature, in a barbarous arbitrary way, executes and makes havock of his subjects, Hab-nab, as they come to hand. Desdemona dropt her Handkerchief; therefore she must be stiff'd. Othello, by law to be broken on the wheel, by the Poets cunning escapes with cutting his own Throat. Cassio, for I know not what, comes off with a broken shin. Iago murders his benefactor, Roderigo, as this were poetical gratitude. Iago is not yet kill'd, because there yet never was such a villain alive. The Devil, if once he brings a man to be dip't in a deadly sin, lets him alone, to take his course: and now when the Foul Fiend has done with him, our wise authors take the sinner into their poetical service; there to accomplish him, and do the Devils drudgery."‡

* Rymer, *Short View*, pp. 137-138.

† Ibid., p. 139.

‡ Ibid., pp. 139-140.

VIEW OF RYMER'S OPINIONS.

A GENERAL VIEW OF RYMER'S OPINIONS.

A summary of Rymer's critical work may be made to this effect: in 1674 he adopted whatever of the theory of poetic justice was to be found in Rapin's *Reflections*. This means that he agreed with Rapin in saying of tragedy that "it lets men see that vice never escapes Unpunished"* though it can not be asserted that he could see any blessing in disguise in the misfortunes of Hecuba in the same way as Rapin did.† In 1678 he entered the field of literary criticism in the fullest sense of the word by the publication of *The Tragedies of the Last Age*. In this work he shows himself to be a rigorist in the matter of poetic justice. He formulated his idea of the doctrine more fully than had been done by any English writer before his time, and took a position more radical than that of any of his predecessors in France or Italy. His theory is not taken directly from Aristotle or from any other critic. He bases it directly on the tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides. Nevertheless, he follows Aristotle, without saying so, in arguing that there must be no excess of goodness or badness in the characters portrayed, but his reason for this is not to be found in Aristotle. His theory admits no mercy for the one who is to suffer, and in making himself clear on this point he introduced into literary criticism the eighteenth century expression that there should be "no hell behind the scenes."‡

Rymer's chief characteristic was that of an extremist. He bound the drama to a set of arbitrary

* Loc. cit. p. 143.

† Loc. cit. p. 143.

‡ Loc. cit. p. 149.

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rules, contrary to the practice of the best dramatists of ancient and modern times. He appeared to be satisfied with Sophocles and Euripides, but it can not be shown that their writings were entirely in harmony with all his laws. His zeal to find in their plays a warrant for the most important of his theories made him prone to look for helps of that kind rather than to discover what might count against him. Addison who came after him could refer to the same sources for arguments just the opposite of those which were advanced by Rymer.

Rymer, however, was not the only English critic of his time to believe in the doctrine of poetic justice. Dennis, as we have noted, was one of those who defended his position, but Dennis came after him and belongs, as it were, to the second epoch of that critical agitation which had poetic justice for its theme. To that same epoch Addison, of course, belongs, and Gildon also. Their opinions on the subject will be set forth in the next chapter.

DENNIS DEFENDS THE DOCTRINE.

CHAPTER IV.

Later Development of the Doctrine of Poetic Justice.

JOHN DENNIS DEFENDS THE DOCTRINE.

JOH N Dennis, the opponent of Addison in the first English controversy about the origin of the doctrine of poetic justice, was born in London in 1657, fifteen years before the date of Addison's birth and sixteen years after that of Rymer. He is related to both of these through the common bond of literary criticism; and to each one separately in a special manner the account of which is to engage our immediate attention.

John Dennis was the literary successor of Thomas Rymer. When Rymer's activity as a literary critic ceased in 1693, that of Dennis began. The special theories which were held by Rymer were almost all adopted by Dennis, in spite of the fact that the latter entered upon his career as a literary critic by objecting to some of the opinions which Rymer had advanced. Rymer had published the last of his three important critical works, *A Short View of Tragedy*, in which he made it clear that there was nothing to be admired in the works of the English writers of tragedy. The result was, that Dennis made a reply called the *Impartial Critic*. It was published in 1693 and may be properly regarded as his introductory contribution to English literary

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criticism. Its chief importance lies in the fact, that it shows the attitude of Dennis towards Rymer whose pet doctrines of poetic justice he was to defend so perseveringly in his essays, and practice so faithfully in his plays. With that feature of his work we are chiefly concerned, in order to show in what way the controversy of 1711 began and how it affected later literary criticism.

In 1701 Dennis published a work called *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*. This was his first important critical work. He had already gained some experience as a man of letters; he had acquired considerable practice as a critic of matters pertaining to the stage, and was classed among the friends of the theatre; and besides this he had already written three dramas. To these considerations must be added the fact that he was now a man of settled views and mature judgment, having reached his forty-second year.

The first impression to be gotten from the *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry* is, that Dennis would be prejudiced against any drama that should fail to produce a good moral effect. It is not even necessary to read the book beyond the introductory pages in order to get this impression. The work proper is preceded by an Epistle dedicatory in which Dennis makes a comparison between Sophocles and Shakespeare in such a way as to suggest what kind of reformation is needed in modern poetry. He remarks that the *Oedipus* of Sophocles is a very religious play, whereas the *Julius Cæsar* of Shakespeare is just the contrary. "For," he says, explaining why he makes this observation, "with

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submission to your Lordship's Judgment I conceive that every tragedy ought to be a very solemn Lecture, inculcating a particular Providence, and showing it plainly protecting the good, and chastening the bad, or at least the violent; And that if it is otherwise, it is either an empty amusement, or a scandalous and pernicious Libel upon the government of the world." Here again we have the traditional view of those who maintained that poetry must necessarily instruct. Of course, Dennis would not recognize the existence of a moral lesson in any play that did violence to the principle of poetic justice. He does not mention the doctrine by name in this dedicatory epistle; but he, nevertheless, shows himself to be uncompromisingly in favor of the doctrine, just as his predecessors did more than half a century before Rymer was born. In referring to the protection of the good and the chastising of the bad, Dennis had in mind the doctrine, just as surely as was the case when he told Addison who invented the doctrine and who introduced it into the English language.

Like Rymer, he was an extremist in his conception of what is proper in poetic justice. He maintained that it was not sufficient to punish the leading characters for their crimes,—the minor characters must be treated according to the same strict rule. For instance, he gives Shakespeare no chance to escape from the reproach of being a bad dramatic artist, when he puts him in a dilemma with respect to the plot of *Julius Cæsar*. "The Killing of Julius Cæsar in Shakespeare," he says, "is either a Murder or a Lawful Action; if the Killing of Cæsar is a Lawful Action, then the Killing of Brutus and

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Cassius is a downright Murder; and the poet has been guilty of polluting the Scene with the blood of the very best and last of the Romans. But if the Killing of Cæsar is Murder, and Brutus and Cassius are very justly punished for it; then Shakespeare is on the other side answerable for introducing so many noble Romans, committing in the open face of an Audience, a very horrible Murder, and only punishing two of them; which proceeding gives an occasion to the people to draw a dangerous inference from it which may be destructive to Governments, and to Human Society.”* This kind of argument shows that Dennis is a faithful disciple of Rymer; for the objection which is here raised to the play is such as may be legitimately drawn from Rymer’s analysis of the subject. In his work called *The Tragedies of the Last Age*, Rymer complains not so much that none of the malefactors was punished in the plays which he censured, as that the distribution of rewards and punishments was unequal. He wants the fate of the lesser characters to conform to the general rule.

Again, Dennis follows Rymer and Rapin in his discussion of the emotions of pity and fear,† thinking he understands correctly Aristotle’s reference to these two emotions. His interpretation is, of course, consistent with the theory that Aristotle wants to teach men to be good by having them learn from the stage how unprofitable it is to be bad,—a theory

* Dennis, Epistle Dedicatory to *The Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*.

† Dennis, *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*, p. 68.

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which presumes that Aristotle intended tragedy to observe the law of poetic justice—but such an interpretation is erroneous, as we have already shown.*

Dennis makes very clear his conception of the relation of poetic justice to comedy, and deserves to be quoted on the subject. After showing that whether the end of comedy be to please or to instruct, this must be accomplished by what is called the *ridiculum*, he makes a distinction between tragedy and comedy, saying that “if comedy shews men unfortunate, it usurps upon Tragedy. The great Disorders of the world are caus’d by great Passions, and they are punish’d by Tragedy. The little Passions cause little disquiets, and make us uneasie to ourselves and one another, and they are expos’d by Comedy. For, that which we call Humour in Comedy is thought to be poetical justice sufficient for it. Not that at last the Characters in Comedy may be chastiz’d at the Catastrophe for faults which they have committed; but that very chastisement ought to be wrapped up in the *Ridiculum*, or the Catastrophe can not be truly Comical.”† It is in this way that Dennis indicated the applicability of the doctrine of poetic justice to comedy. His treatment of the subject was at the time new and original, since this phase of the discussion had not been taken up by his predecessors. What Rymer would say on the subject we can only guess at; it is very likely that he would approve of the argument which Dennis made.

Three years elapsed before Dennis published his

* See pp. 60 ff.

† *Advancement and Reformation of Modern Poetry*, p. 55.

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next important critical work, called *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*. The date of publication is the year 1704. In this work, as in the other, poetry is considered in the light of morality. "Poetry," he says, "has two ends, a subordinate and a final one, the subordinate one is Pleasure, and the final one is instruction."* He goes even farther than this, for he argues in favor of a close relation between poetry and religion, saying that not only is poetry a help to religion, but that poetry unaided by religion can not attain its highest perfection. This is practically the thesis which Dennis attempts to enlarge upon in the hundred and twenty-seven pages which constitute the book. Further commentary on it is unnecessary.

In the year 1712 Dennis brought out a collection of letters which he had written during the preceding year. The book is small, but it gives a pretty complete record of what Dennis had to say to Addison on the question of poetic justice; it also contains his opinions on Shakespeare. The book is called *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Shakespeare with some Letters of Criticism to the Spectator*. The great Elizabethan dramatist is praised and blamed. In one place Dennis says that "Shakespeare was one of the greatest Genius's that the World e'er saw for the Tragic Stage."† In another place he shows how this praise is to be taken; he asks "what would he not have been, if he had joined to so happy a Genius Learning and the Poetical Art?"‡ These two statements appear to be entirely contradictory. The

* *Grounds of Criticism*, p. 8.

† *An Essay* etc., p. 1.

‡ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

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difficulty, however, vanishes when one understands the principle upon which he based his opinions. By insinuating that Shakespeare did not possess the poetical art, he meant that Shakespeare depicted historical events rather than fables. Some of his dramas, it is true, contained a reconstruction of the facts of history, but that consideration would not of itself remove the difficulty. A poet might, according to Dennis, make an entirely original plot and use it for the purposes of tragedy or comedy, but he would not by that fact become a poetical artist. His plot might not be poetical fiction at all; for poetical fiction portrays idealized truth, and idealized truth can not be portrayed in any story that violates the law of poetical justice. In order that any dramatist be characterized as a poetical artist he must present to Dennis the spectacle of rewarded virtue and punished vice. Shakespeare had not done this. He may have been successful in using the bare events of history,—so successful as to be a genius,—but how much greater would have been his success if he had only had the poetical art. If he had used the fable, “he would have mov’d ten times more.”* Why this should be so, Dennis then proceeds to show, concluding his argument in this wise, “Tis observable, that both in a Poetical Fiction and an Historical Relation, those Events are most entertaining, the most surprising, and most wonderful, in which Providence most plainly appears. And tis for this Reason that the Author of a Just Fable, must please more than the Writer of an Historical Relation.”† Our author indicates that the pleasure derived from the one

* Ibid., p. 5.

† Ibid., p. 6.

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differs from that derived from the other only in a comparative degree, and from this we might carelessly conclude, that the poetical art of one writer differs from that of the other only in degree also; but such a conclusion is not to be drawn from what Dennis says. In the first place, he does not regard it the chief aim of poetry to please. The chief aim of the true poet is to instruct, and there can be no instruction without poetical fable, and there can be no poetical fable without poetic justice. This poetic justice must be constant and complete, "The Good," he says, "must never fail to prosper, and the bad must be always punish'd."*

Rymer and others before him had thought of only one reason for insisting on poetic justice; Dennis finds a supplementary reason. With his predecessors he holds to the opinion that the violation of the doctrine of rewards and punishments means a lesson that is hurtful to morality; but he goes farther into the argument than the others did; for he maintains that if this law were not constantly and rigidly observed in poetry, "the Incidents and particularly the Catastrophe which is the grand Incident, are liable to be imputed rather to Chance, than to Almighty Conduct and to Sovereign Justice."† In other words, there would be no practical lesson to be drawn from the occasional observance of the rule. Men would not carry into their lives any dread of doing wrong, since punishments would seem to be distributed without any regard to merit or demerit; and in consequence of this, men would be disposed to act as if there were no moral law.

* Ibid., pp. 6-7.

† Ibid., p. 7.

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Dennis does not say that the effect of a positive moral lesson in one play might be offset by the lack of a moral lesson in the next play which the individual should witness; but this inference follows logically from his reasoning on the subject. He does say, however, that such a thing can happen within a single play. It is not sufficient that the leading characters be punished or rewarded according to their deserts. The same strict law must apply to all. "The want of this impartial Distribution of Justice," he says, "makes the Coriolanus of Shakespeare to be without Moral. 'Tis true indeed Coriolanus is Kill'd by those Foreign Enemies with whom he had openly sided against his Country, which seems to be an Event worthy of Providence, and would look as if it were contriv'd by infinite Wisdom, and executed by supreme Justice, to make Coriolanus a dreadful Example to all, who lead on Foreign Enemies to the Invasion of their native Country; if there were not something in the Fate of the other characters, which gives occasion to doubt of it, and which suggests to the sceptical Reader that this might happen."*

Here we have in a single sentence the exposition of the doctrine which Addison described as ridiculous. Dennis, as may be noticed, declared for the punishment of all wrongs that are committed, no matter whether the agent be a prominent character or one of minor importance. Addison maintained that this requirement was excessively and ridiculously strict. He did not deny that good plays might be written in conformity to such a plan, but he objected

* Ibid.

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strenuously to the proposition that this should be a universal law. In order that there might be no possible misunderstanding of what Dennis meant, he made a careful analysis of Shakespeare's "Coriolanus." He showed in what way Aufidius is the principal Murderer in the play, and called attention to the fact that he not only escapes punishment but seems to be rewarded. "But not only Aufidius," says Dennis, "but the Roman Tribunes, Sicinius and Brutus, appear to me to cry aloud for Poetick Vengeance. For they are guilty of two faults, neither of which ought to go unpunished."* The procuring of the banishment of Coriolanus was one of these faults; the using of dishonorable methods to attain this end was the other fault. After proving to his own satisfaction that these are real faults, he closes his discussion of the play by observing that the tribunes escape punishment.

One of the reasons why Dennis goes so minutely into the examination of this play was that he had written a play of his own on the same subject about six years earlier. Referring to the fact, he says, "I humbly conceive therefore that this want of Dramatical Justice in the Tragedy of Coriolanus, gave occasion for a just Alteration, and that I was oblig'd to sacrifice to that Justice Aufidius and the Tribunes, as well as Coriolanus."† This, however, is not the only Shakespearean play in which he finds this fundamental error. "Indeed," he says, "Shakespeare, has been wanting in the exact Distribution of Poetical Justice not only in his Coriolanus, but in most of his best Tragedies, in which the Guilty

* Ibid., p. 8.

† Ibid., p. 10.

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and the Innocent perish promiscuously; as Duncan and Banquo in *Macbeth*, as likewise Lady Macduffe and her Children; Desdemona in *Othello*; Cordelia, Kent, and King Lear, in the Tragedy that bears his Name; Brutus and Porcia in *Julius Cæsar*, and young Hamlet in the Tragedy of Hamlet.”*

The passage cited from the first of the three letters which constitute the *Essay on Shakespeare* gives us so clear a notion of what Dennis conceived poetic justice to be, that further quotation is unnecessary. He argues for the use of fiction instead of fact, and insists that the distinguishing feature of fiction is the unfailing regularity with which it portrays the reward of all virtues and the punishment of all vices. He holds that the non-observance of this rule in poetry has the effect of making men indifferent to the consequences of their acts; and he strengthens this conclusion by saying that chance would appear to supplant Providence in determining the fate of the individual.

Further examination of the remaining critical work of Dennis shows a strict adherence to these views. His theory regarding rewards and punishments, thus enunciated, was not modified in any essential during the remaining years of his life. The letter from which we have made our quotations was written on the first of February 1711. On the fourteenth of the following April Addison took up the discussion of the drama, and two days later he paid his compliments to Dennis by speaking of poetic justice as “A ridiculous doctrine of modern criticism.”† Dennis replied immediately in a letter

* *Ibid.*, p. 9.

† *Loc. cit.* p. 2.

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To the Spectator upon his Paper on the 16th of April, saying of it that "there are as many Bulls and Blunders in it almost as there are Lines, and all deliver'd with that insolent and blust'ring Air, which usually attends upon Error, and Delusion, while Truth, like the Deity that inspires it, comes calmly and without noise."* This was the letter which gave to Aristotle the distinction of making "a very formal Recommendation of the impartial and exact Execution of Poetical Justice,"† and to Rymer the distinction of having been the first to introduce the doctrine "into our native Language."‡ There is no weakness shown by Dennis in his defence; he follows his usual method, putting his argument into a sort of sorites, saying that the doctrine of poetic justice "is itself the Foundation of all the Rules, and even of Tragedy itself. For what Tragedy can there be without a Fable? or what Fable without a Moral? or what Moral without Poetic Justice? What Moral, where the Good and the Bad are confounded by Destiny, and perish alike promiscuously."§

In all this, Dennis holds faithfully to the position taken by Rymer; and in one more point, worthy of mention, he follows the theory of his predecessor. With Rymer he maintains that there should be no punishments left for the life to come. "The Creatures of a poetical Creator," he says, "are imaginary and transitory; they have no longer duration than the Representation of their respective Fables; and consequently if they offend, they must be punish'd during that Representation."|| But Dennis adds to

* *An Essay* etc., p. 39.

† *Ibid.*, p. 41.

‡ *Ibid.* § *Ibid.*, p. 42.

|| *Ibid.*, p. 45.

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Rymer's thoughts on this subject a consideration that Rymer seemed not to approve of; for Dennis admits that he is "far from pretending that poetical justice is an equal Representation of the Justice of the Almighty," saying that it is "but a very narrow and a very imperfect Type of it."|| Rymer, on the contrary required that the punishment be excessive from the point of view of civil law in order to get at the equivalent of divine retribution; and in order that this be possible, he made the guilt so devoid of malice that the retribution could take place in the play. With Aristotle he held that it is wrong to punish a perfectly good person, and Dennis held that opinion also. But his idea of the proper kind of tragic guilt provides for a nearer approach to divine retribution, in degree, than Dennis thinks possible. To drop a handkerchief, as Desdemona does, is to do no tragic wrong, thinks Rymer. The tragic guilt arises out of a deed that is *per se* wrong, such as manslaughter or incest; not out of actions that are in themselves indifferent or good. In order that such tragic guilt be balanced by an exact distribution of poetic justice, leaving no retribution for the life hereafter, Rymer proposes that the agent be impelled to the action involuntarily or in ignorance of the consequences; and to illustrate this principle he points to the sin of Oedipus, and suggests certain modifications in the *Rollo* of Beaumont and Fletcher. It even seems that Rymer would go farther in the severity of his punishments than divine justice would allow,—the reason being, that while on the one hand he would thereby make men fear to do wrong,

* Ibid.

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on the other hand he would arouse in them a feeling of pity for the unfortunate sufferer. Dennis does not seem to argue for such excess, and yet it is difficult to prove that he is willing to argue against it. The most we can say is this, that Dennis thinks of dramatical justice as something less than divine justice, while Rymer gives us the impression that the agent of an act, materially vicious but blindly committed, should be punished more severely than the civil law would allow. From the point of view of divine justice there is no guilt where there is no moral responsibility; and consequently Rymer's stage punishments seem to be excessive as compared with those of the next world.

In his *Letter to the Spectator upon his Paper on the 24th of April*, Dennis reaffirms his position without argument. Addison had practically ignored his former letter, deigning only to quote from his translation of the *Fourth Satire* of Boileau the least deserving couplet he could find. Dennis felt hurt at this, as might be expected, and so we have his letter on the subject. The Dennis-Addison controversy was at an end, though Dennis took occasion two years later to criticize his opponent's *Cato*. To show that he discussed the play from the point of view of poetic justice and to illustrate how unchanging are his opinions on this subject, it will be sufficient to quote from his *Remarks upon Cato* one short passage. "The poetical persons in tragedy," he says, "exist no longer than the reading or the representation, the whole extent of their enmity is circumscribed by those; and therefore during the reading or representation, according to their merits or demerits, they

ADDISON INSTITUTES A REVOLT

must be punished or rewarded. If this is not done, there is no impartial distribution of poetical justice, no instructive lecture of a particular providence, and no imitation of the divine dispensation."*

The *Remarks upon Cato* was not the last critical work that Dennis produced. In 1617 he published his *Remarks on Pope's Translation of Homer*, and in 1726 he published a treatise called *The Stage Defended*. These and his other minor contributions to literary criticism might be helpful in illustrating completely his theory of the drama; but with such a task we are not concerned. In closing our examination of his critical writings it is pertinent to refer to the fact that he was unsuccessful in his efforts to put his theory into practice. He wrote plays that illustrated in particular the workings of the doctrine of poetic justice, but none of them were received with the welcome he had expected. His own reflections on this fact were set forth in 1721 in his Preface to the second edition of *Coriolanus*. The failure of this particular play reminds one of the fate of Rymer's *Edgar* which was never acted, though it was published three times. *Coriolanus* was acted only three times.

JOSEPH ADDISON INSTITUTES A REVOLT.

Joseph Addison was about thirty-nine years of age when he began his discussion of the drama in No. 39 of the *Spectator*. The only point in which this paper dealt with the problem we have under consideration is contained in the unpretentious introductory sentence. "As perfect Tragedy," says Addison, "is

* Quoted in Johnson's *Life of Aristotle*, Works VII., p. 458.

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the noblest Production of human Nature, so it is capable of giving the Mind one of the most delightful and most improving Entertainments." Here we have an echo of the teaching of Horace on the function of poetry. Emphasis is not given to the ethical value of tragedy, nor is the ethical consideration entirely neglected; there is a sort of balancing of the moral and the æsthetic, the preference, if any, being given to the latter. That this should be Addison's opinion about tragedy, and that he set it forth in the first sentence of his treatise on the drama, is particularly interesting in view of the fact that the subsequent quarrel about poetic justice gave rise to the question whether or not it is the chief aim of the drama to instruct.

In No. 40 of the *Spectator* Addison again makes his first sentence very suggestive, by referring at once to the law of poetic justice. "The English Writers of Tragedy," he says, "are possessed with a Notion, that when they represent a virtuous or innocent person in Distress, they ought not to leave him till they have delivered him out of his Troubles, or made him triumph over his Enemies." This is not the first time that we have used this quotation. This and the two sentences which follow it constitute the beginning of the controversy on poetic justice and offered us a starting point for our inquiry into the Greek origin and English basis of the doctrine. It was in the third of these sentences* that Addison confessed his ignorance as to the origin of the doctrine, thus drawing from Dennis the reply in which the name of Rymer was joined with that of Aristotle. Addison,

* Loc. cit. p. 2.

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of course, rejected the doctrine, saying that there was nothing to support it in theory or practice. In supporting his contention, he argues that such a strict distribution of rewards and punishments is contrary to the experiences of life, since fortune and misfortune, happiness and unhappiness, pleasure and pain, are the common portion of all men regardless of the fact whether they are good or not. Then, taking it for granted that it is "the principal Design of Tragedy" to arouse the emotions of pity and fear, he says that this end will be defeated if the spectator can apply a formula to the drama and thereby anticipate the ending; for "whatever Crosses and Disappointments a good Man suffers in the Body of the Tragedy, they will make but small Impression on our Minds, when we know that in the last Act he is to arrive at the End of his Wishes and Desires."

That is the argument from reason; the argument from authority is based on Aristotle and on the writers of tragedy. He notes that Aristotle favors the kind of tragedy that has an unhappy ending. It seems, however, that by using this as an argument against poetic justice he goes a little too far. He should have taken into account the character of the hero as Aristotle conceived him. Aristotle contended that the hero should be neither excessively good nor excessively bad. As a result, therefore, the Aristotelian hero was to be guilty of some fault. The punishment of such a fault would be in line with the requirements of poetic justice. But Addison thinks the unhappy ending is inconsistent with the "ridiculous doctrine," the reason being that he has in mind the unhappy ending of a virtuous character, whereas

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Aristotle makes it very clear that the protagonist is to be neither notably good nor remarkably bad; he distinctly says that the unhappy end is to be the outcome of "some error or frailty."* But in order that we may not appear to make Aristotle an advocate of poetic justice, it is necessary to reiterate what has already been shown, that he is opposed to plays which illustrate not only the adversity of the bad but also the prosperity of the good. He favors a one-sided presentation which will arouse only the emotions of pity and fear. The arousing of these emotions comes about through the very severe calamities which befall the hero for his errors. Aristotle, though he was silent concerning this matter, would not give prominence to the reward of virtuous conduct, because in this way he would excite contrary emotions that would weaken the activity of the two emotions with which tragedy is properly concerned. Why he should restrict tragedy to the exercise of these two emotions, we have already shown.† Addison was right in thinking that Aristotle was not an advocate of poetic justice, but he was wrong in the argument he advanced to support his opinion.

In his discussion of the tragedies which were written by Shakespeare and others, Addison makes a very sensible and effective argument in favor of his thesis. He points to the success achieved by many English tragedies in which the favorites of the audience came to unhappy ends. *Othello* and *King Lear* are mentioned among these. Speaking of the latter in particular, he says that it is an

* *Poetics XIII.*, in Butcher, p. 43.

† Loc. cit. p. 53.

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admirable tragedy, "as Shakespeare wrote it; but as it is reformed according to the Chymerical Notion of Poetical Justice, in my humble opinion it has lost half its Beauty",* In order, however, to show a spirit of fairness and to justify a middle course which he adopts, he admits that there have been several good plays in which the doctrine of poetic justice was observed. He mentions a few by name and then remarks, that he "must also allow, that many of Shakespeare's, and several of the most celebrated Tragedies of Antiquity, are cast in the same Form." In conclusion he says, "I do not therefore dispute against this way of writing Tragedies, but against the criticism that would establish this as the only method; and by that means would very much cramp the English Tragedy, and perhaps give a wrong Bent to the Genius of our Writers." And this was the paper that provoked Dennis to write a reply that exhibited more personal feeling than good judgment and to let his temper get the best of him in public.†

The nearest approach to a development of Addison's views on this subject occurs in No. 548 of the *Spectator*. Though the article was published

* Addison refers to Nahum Tate's version with which Dr. Johnson was so pleased half a century later.

† This paper was, according to Pope, the occasion of John Dennis's "deplorable frenzy" in Lentot's book shop, March 27th, 1712. "Opening one of the volumes of the *Spectator*, in large paper, (he) did suddenly, without the least provocation, tear out that No.—, where the author treats of poetical justice, and cast it into the street." (Narr. of Dr. Rob. Norris, Pope's Works, X., p. 459). See G. Smith's Edition of the *Spectator*, p. 331, note.

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anonymously, there is sufficient reason to ascribe the authorship of it to Addison. The question of poetic justice is taken up again and treated from the point of view of goodness or badness in the hero. He accepts Aristotle's limitations concerning the character of the hero and admits that he should not be "perfect or faultless; not only because such a Character is improper to move Compassion, but because there is no such thing in nature." He still holds out against poetic justice, citing as an argument that Homer gives a happy ending to Achilles in spite of his "morally vicious" character. That he refers to Homer at all, is accounted for by his theory that if the law of poetic justice should apply to tragedy, it should apply also to the epic.

In one particular, contribution No. 548 of the *Spectator* shows a modification of the opinion set forth in No. 40. In the latter paper Addison seems to have arrived at the conclusion that it is quite proper that the very wicked should come to an unhappy end. Furthermore, he shows a little consideration for poetic justice in the accounting for the sufferings of the so-called virtuous, on the grounds that no human being can be so good as not to deserve misfortunes. Since he has admitted this, we find that he narrows the field of his objection to the doctrine of rewards and punishments. With Dennis he will admit that the very bad should be always punished; with him he will admit that the less wicked may be punished for justice' sake, but not always. He still insists that the moderately bad may avoid at times the consequences of human frailty, and that the very good may be brought to

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an excessively unhappy end. He will not surrender the liberties of the dramatic writer to all the arbitrary provisions implied by poetic justice; neither will he make that liberty so large as to permit the very wicked to escape. On this point he says, "The best of Men are vicious enough to justify Providence for any misfortunes and Afflictions which may befall them, but there are many men so criminal that they have no claim or Pretence to Happiness. The best of men may deserve punishment, but the worst of men cannot deserve Happiness." Such a passage as this, it seems, could be used to advantage by Gervinus and Snider and others who cling to the doctrine of poetic justice and at the same time hold Shakespeare in such reverence that they discover tragic guilt where Dennis and Rymer find none. With the authority of Addison to support them they can more insistently declare that Desdemona's death is the proper punishment for her crime. Unhappy ends of all kinds may be accounted for on the theory that "the best of Men are vicious."

CHARLES GILDON ACCEPTS THE TRADITIONAL VIEW.

The controversy was in a measure one-sided. Addison was alone. Opposed to him personally there was, it is true, only Dennis. But there were others besides Dennis who had the same idea of dramatic poetry. Contemporaneous with Dennis, and almost equally strong in his defence of the theory, was Charles Gildon who was born in 1688 and died in 1724. He was an author of plays as well as a literary critic, and in this he resembled Dennis. The earliest of his plays represents an attempt at

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constructing a tragedy according to the principles of poetic justice. But earlier than the time when he became a writer of plays he had an opportunity to declare himself in favor of the same doctrine. In 1694 he published a collection of *Letters and Essays*, part of which were written by himself, and part by other persons. The Epistle dedicatory to this work contains a declaration of his views in regard to the punishment of wickedness and the rewarding of virtue in poetry. "The Poets indeed," he says, "have been the bold Persecutors of Vice in All Ages, and have ever rewarded Virtue with Immortality." The preface of the same book shows that he did not approve of the severity with which Rymer criticized English writers, and Shakespeare in particular; he declares that he is "sorry that a Man of Mr. Rymer's learning should be so bigotted to the Antients, as to become an enemy to the Honor of his own Country in that thing, which, is perhaps the only we can truly pretend to excel all others in, viz Poetry." And not only in the preface, but throughout the book, this same spirit of hostility is made manifest. It would seem that Gildon can imagine no critic so devoid of merit as Rymer, and consequently so worthy of scorn and condemnation.

As a source for an expression of Gildon's views, the *Miscellaneous Letters and Essays on Several Subjects* might easily be overlooked, since superficially the book does not appear to be one of Gildon's works, nor is it mentioned under his name in the *National Dictionary of Biography*. The title page does not bear his name, but rather the names of several to whom the letters were addressed, and the

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authorship is ascribed to "Several Gentlemen and Ladies." Nevertheless, many of the contributions are signed by Gildon, and others that bear no signature are evidently by his hand. Those to which we shall call attention were probably written by Gildon in the years 1693 and 1694.

First of all, *The Epistle Dedicatory*, signed by Gildon, contains an argument on the thesis that Poetry is "A Friend to, and promoter of Virtue; and an Enemy of Vice." This same thesis is discussed in the second article in the book,* also signed by Gildon. Article number three is *An Apology for Poetry, in an Essay directed to Walter Moil Esq.* It is unsigned, but may be justly attributed to Gildon, and, as such, would offer an interesting study if compared with his *Complete Art of Poetry* which was published twenty-four years later. In the *Apology* he treats pretty fully of the aim of poetry with respect to pleasure and instruction, and seems to favor an opinion much like that of Dryden in his later years. He says, "That the End of Poetry is Noble, since it reaches the greatest Pleasure and the Sure Profit, of our Minds, and of our Life, Since 'tis directed to the Praise of the Omnipotent, the Celebration of Virtues, the Rewards and Glory of Noble Acts, the Punishment and Infamy of Evil: Since to it we owe all the increases of our Knowledge; and finally since it effects all those noble Ends it aims at."† Here, of course, he recognizes the doctrine of poetic justice in a passing way. He does not lay any stress upon it, probably because there

* *Miscellaneous Letters*, etc., pp. 5-6.

† *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

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was no need of emphasizing a rule which had stood the test of criticism for nearly twenty years, with Rymer as an advocate of the doctrine and Dryden as its brilliant exponent. The extreme opposition which Gildon manifested towards Rymer seems quite unusual, since Rymer's critical opinions arose out of the doctrine of poetical justice. One would expect Gildon to reject the principles upon which his contemporary's judgments were based, rather than the conclusions which were based on those principles. In spite of his attitude towards this extreme advocate of the ethical in poetry, Gildon afterwards wrote plays in conformity with most of the rules which Rymer insisted upon.

One of the important articles in this book is titled *Some Reflections on Mr. Rymer's Short View of Tragedy, and an Attempt at a Vindication of Shakespeare, in an Essay directed to John Dryden Esq.* It is particularly remarkable, because it shows into what detail Gildon can go in his examination of Rymer's work, without a formal discussion of poetic justice. The nearest he comes to the subject is in the paragraph where he declares that Genuis can not bear to be too much bound down by rules. He says: "All that is great of Humane things, makes a nearer approach to the Eternal Perfection of Greatness, and extends as much as possible its limits towards being Boundless: 'Tis not govern'd by Common Rules and Methods, but Glories in a Noble Irregularity."* This same article contains another passage that is worth while quoting, for the reason that it gives a more satisfactory explanation of the

* Ibid., p. 91.

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relation of the ethical and æsthetical functions of the drama than is found in the writings of his predecessors. He says of Shakespeare that all his faults "have not been able to frustrate his obtaining the end of All just Poems, Pleasure and Profit. To deny this, wou'd be to fly in the Face of the Known experience of so many Years. He has (I say) in most, if not all, of his Plays attained the full end of Poetry Delight and Profit, by moving Terror and Pity for the Changes of Fortune, which Humane Life is subject to, by giving us a lively and just Image of them (the best Definition of a Play) for the Motives of these Passions afford us Pleasure, and their Purgation Profit."* To this passage should be added another taken from the letter *To my Honoured and Ingenius Friend Mr. Harrigan, for the Modern Poets against the Ancients*. Again he makes an attack against Rymer as one of those who have not treated the English writers fairly; his argument, however, is against all "the Enemies of the Moderns," who, he says, "deny them to be Poets because they have not strictly observed the rules laid down by Aristotle, but by that they discover themselves either ignorant or negligent of the most chief and important end of Poetry, that is Pleasure—all those that exclaim against the Liberty some of our English Poets have taken, must grant that a Variety that Contributes to the main design can not divide our concern: And if so, 'tis certainly an Excellence the Moderns have gained above the Ancients."† From all this it would seem that Gildon puts pleasure before profit, not

* Ibid., p. 92.

† Ibid., pp. 223-224.

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only in the order of their occurrence in a play, but also in the order of their importance; and it seems also that he is ready to reject the kind of dramatic law that is based on the *ipse dixit* of Aristotle. A further argument for this second conclusion may be drawn from the most important of the articles in this collection, *An Essay at a Vindication of Love in Tragedies against Rapin and Mr. Rymer. Directed to Mr. Dennis.*

The Essay in question does not bear Gildon's signature, but it is undoubtedly his. Aristotle, it must be remembered, mentioned only two passions in his definition of tragedy. Rapin in his *Reflections* noted a modern tendency to introduce other emotions. Dryden in his *Heads of an Answer* approved of such an enlargement of the idea of tragedy, and now we find Gildon making an elaborate argument in favor of the modern tendency. He makes it a point however, to show that the use of the passion of love and kindred passions helps to bring about the purgation of pity and fear, by which explanation he avoids any positive overthrow of Aristotle.

It was not until 1698 that Gildon wrote anything that strikingly indicated his faith in the dogma of poetic justice. In that year he published a tragedy called *Phaeton*, in the preface of which he expressed himself as follows in regard to rewards and punishments: "No unfortunate character ought to be introduced on the Stage, without its Humane Frailties to justify its Misfortunes: For unfortunate Perfection, is the Crime of Providence, and to offer that, is an Impiety a Poet ought never to be guilty of; being directly opposite to his duty of Rewarding

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the Innocent, and punishing the Guilty; and by that means, to establish a just notion of Providence in its most important Action, the Government of Mankind.

"This the great Sophocles has been notoriously guilty of in his Oedipus Tyrannus, where he punishes Oedipus for an Accident, as much as for the most criminal offences." Here we have, on the one hand, the doctrine on poetic justice in all its strictness, as Rymer would have it; but, on the other hand, we have a notion of wrong which in its application to Sophocles, gives us a result to which Rymer would not subscribe. There is more on the subject in the preface, but nothing that will help materially to show the development of Gildon's opinion on poetic justice. We might also examine the tragedy itself, *Phaeton*, and the other plays which he wrote during the following four or five years; but this would also show a lack of development along these lines. What he said in the preface to *Phaeton* in 1698 was repeated in substance when he published, in 1703, *The Patriot or the Italian Conspiracy, a Tragedy*, the Epistle Dedicatory of which shows that he regards it the "Business and Aim" of dramatic poetry "to Reward Virtue, to Expose Vice, to regulate our Criminal Passions by Examples, always more touching, than Precept." The chief significance of what has been here quoted is observable only when we call to mind his critical views of 1694. He then put pleasure before profit; he now thinks of profit only as the end of poetry, without making any particular reference to pleasure.

For the further exemplification of his theory

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of poetry we can refer at once to the most important of his works on the subject, *The Complete Art of Poetry*, published in London in 1718. In the fourth Dialogue of this work he gives both sides of the Dennis-Addison controversy and concludes by saying that Dennis had the better of the argument. He next discusses the purgation of the emotions of pity and fear in a passage that will bear repetition. "Aristotle," he says, "never pretends that Tragedy is designed to eradicate and destroy these two passions, but that it is to purge them, that is, to take away that Violence which they may have on a Mind too much possess'd by them, and reduce them to such a Degree of Temperance, as that they may not have a Power of carrying us from, or Contrary to the Rules and Dictates of right Reason; and this is certainly best done by their Motion; for by the Frequence or Vehemence of that Motion, the Passion grows naturally of less Force and Power, as Experience may convince us. I have known a certain Tragedy, in our English Language, which on first reading mov'd compassion so much, that it was impossible to stop a Flood of Tears; yet I have read it so often and let it move me so much, that at last I could peruse it without a Tear. . . . This excess of Pity is what Tragedy would correct; the same may be said of Fear or Terror."*

It can hardly be denied that Gildon gives us a satisfactory interpretation of what Aristotle meant by his reference to these emotions; though it is not evident that he attempted to compare Plato and Aristotle in their discussion of these two emotions.

* Gildon, *The Complete Art of Poetry*, I., p. 197.

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Again, Gildon shows a return to the Aristotelian idea in designating pity and fear as the only emotions to be aroused. In 1694 he showed a disposition to add other emotions, such as love; but in 1718 he comes back to the strict Aristotelian requirement in this regard, saying that "Admiration is too calm a Passion for Tragedy," and that Love is "directly opposite to that Majesty"* which this kind of poetry requires. His definition is not, however, identical with that of Aristotle, for he calls tragedy "An Imitation of some one serious, grave and entire Action, of a just Length, and contain'd within the Unities of Time and Place; and which without Narration, by the Means of Terror and Compassion, purges those Passions, and all others which are like them, that is, whose Prevalence can throw us into the same or the like Misfortunes."†

The chief thing to be said about *The Complete Art of Poetry* is this, that it lays down practically the same principles that Rymer had borrowed from the French, but makes no attempt to apply these principles unwisely, thus avoiding the greatest of Rymer's errors. Gildon believed in the doctrine of poetic justice, and exemplified the workings of the doctrine in his plays; but he did not distinguish himself by any unusual defence of the doctrine. The opportunity to enter into the discussion of the subject came to him when he reproduced the original arguments made in the Dennis Addison controversy; but the opportunity was not accepted. Gildon dismissed the subject by praising the defence made by Dennis. We can, therefore, conclude that Dennis

* Ibid., I., p. 199.

† Ibid., I., p. 222.

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and Gildon held substantially the same opinion on the doctrine of poetic justice.

Contemporaneous with Dennis, Addison and Gildon there were several other critics whose contributions to literature might be searched for passages that would indicate the stand they took in regard to this problem of literary criticism, but such a search would be unprofitable. We were chiefly concerned with showing what was meant by poetic justice at the time when Addison became a defender of the liberties of the dramatist and insisted that the reputation of English writers of tragedy should not be blasted by the enforcement of any universal and arbitrary rule such as Dennis and critics of his kind proposed. This revolt would have come eighteen years earlier than it did, if Dryden had not applied the rule of poetic justice to many of his own plays. He could see then, as well as Addison did in 1711, how hurtful to the reputation of Shakespeare were the arbitrary principles of literary criticism by which Rymer attempted to measure the greatness of the world's best poets. Dryden had committed himself absolutely to the practice of an exact and impartial distribution of rewards and punishments, and for this reason he did not go about the defence of Shakespeare in the right way. Addison was free in this respect; he realized that Shakespeare was one of the world's greatest dramatists, and he concluded that if Shakespeare had violated any important dramatic law, it was time to inquire into the origin of such dramatic law. The answer to his inquiry revealed the fact that the law to which he most objected was formulated before Shakespeare was

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born and that it grew out of a study of plays which were not necessarily greater than those that Shakespeare himself had written. Inasmuch, therefore, as the revolt against poetic justice began when English men of letters realized the harm that such a doctrine would do to the reputation of the greatest poet of the greatest age of English poetry, it is well to take a rapid glance at some of the appreciations of Shakespeare which are representative of literary criticism in the last two hundred years. The question of poetic justice has not become a dead issue even in our own day, and for that reason we may confidently expect to find it discussed here and there, not only in studies dealing with Shakespeare, but also in such critical works as take note of development in the idea of tragedy.

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Dr. Samuel Johnson is the most distinguished of the eighteenth century English commentators on Shakespeare to whom we can turn for an opinion on poetic justice. The preface to his edition of Shakespeare, published in 1765, contains a passage which shows that he regarded poetic justice as a necessary law of the drama. Shakespeare's first defect, he says, "is that to which may be imparted most of the evil in books or in man. He sacrifices virtue to convenience, and is so much more careful to please than instruct, that he seems to write without any moral purpose. From his writings indeed a system of social duty may be selected, for he that thinks reasonably must think morally;

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but his precepts and axioms drop casually from him; he makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is he always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care, and leaves their examples to operate by chance. This fault the barbarity of his age can not extenuate; for it is always a writer's duty to make the world better, and justice is a virtue independent on time or place."*

But Dr. Johnson's opinion underwent a change as regards poetic justice, and on this account it is necessary to call attention to certain parts of the passage just quoted. Several of the expressions used indicate that he has in mind the principle that the good must be rewarded and that the wicked must be punished. What else can he mean, for instance, when he speaks of "A just distribution of good or evil?" He does not refer to the actions of the persons of the play, but rather to the consequences of their actions, as is evident from the context; in other words, Shakespeare is accused of establishing a relation between an act and its consequences that can not be approved of on the grounds of justice. To do this, is to commit a wrong from the point of view of dramatic art and also from the point of view of ethics. If Johnson tolerated any deviation from the rule of poetic justice, it would be hardly fair to say that he accused Shakespeare of violating a fundamental principle of dramatic art, but the

* *Eighteenth Century Essays*, Edited by D. N. Smith, p. 123.

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fact remains that he admits of no exception to the rule, since he insists that "it is always a writer's duty to make the world better." It is, of course, clear that Dr. Johnson thinks Shakespeare has not always done his duty in this respect, not only because the consequences of actions do not constantly illustrate the workings of a just Providence, but also because the virtuous characters which he portrays do not in all cases show a disapproval of what is wrong.

This was the attitude of Dr. Johnson towards the doctrine of poetic justice in 1765. Observe now the change that took place about fifteen years later. It was then that he published his *Lives of the Poets*, and had occasion again to deal with this same problem in literary criticism. It will be remembered that his *Life of Addison* contains a pretty full account of the *Remarks* of Dennis on Addison's *Cato*. After quoting the passage in which Dennis declares that everywhere throughout the play Addison "makes virtue suffer and vice triumph,"* Dr. Johnson makes a commentary which shows that he now entertains opinions that are just the opposite of those which he expressed in 1765. "Whatever pleasure there may be," he says, "in seeing crimes punished and virtue rewarded, yet, since wickedness often prospers in real life, the poet is certainly at liberty to give it prosperity on the stage. For if poetry has an imitation of reality, how are its laws broken by exhibiting the world in its true form? The stage may sometimes gratify our wishes; but if it be truly 'the mirror of life,' it ought to show us sometimes

* Johnson, *Life of Addison*, *Works*, VII., p. 458.

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what we are to expect.”* The change of opinion is signally apparent. He no longer holds that it is always the duty of the poet to picture the ideal; he rather holds that there should be exceptions to this rule, in order to show us what we are to expect in real life. It is hardly fair, then, to characterize Dr. Johnson as an advocate of poetic justice, even though he supported the doctrine in the preface from which we have quoted. It is not likely that Dr. Johnson was ready in his later years to find fault with Shakespeare as he did in 1765, when he favored a happy ending for *Lear*, and, as Professor Lounsbury remarks, “wished to see the virtue of Cordelia rewarded as well as the wickedness of her sisters punished.”†

Dr. Johnson’s final judgment on the drama was, that it should be the mirror of life, and in this he agreed with Addison, who justified his contention by saying that the ancient writers of tragedy “treated Men in their Plays as they are dealt with in the World; by making Virtue sometimes happy and sometimes miserable.”‡ And Johnson, more than any other critic, is to be given the credit of making ‘the mirror of life’ a suggestive phrase in literary criticism, just as it is likewise true that Rymer

* One could scarcely ask for a more explicit statement of the doctrine of realism. No matter how great is the objection to be raised against some of our modern exponents of realism, we must still remember that the underlying principles upon which this theory of art is based have been enunciated by literary critics of considerable distinction and merit. Not the least of these were Johnson and Addison.

† Lounsbury, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, p. 413.

‡ *Spectator*, No. 40.

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deserves the credit of introducing into our language the expressive phrase, 'poetical justice.'

Between the time of the publication of Dr. Johnson's edition of Shakespeare and the writing of his *Life of Addison*, Sir William Cook produced a work called *The Elements of Dramatic Criticism*. Like many before him, he falls into an error in the interpretation of Aristotle's definition of tragedy, calling it "the imitation of an action, which, by means of terror and compassion, refines and purifies in us all sorts of passion." The mistake of interpretation consists in this, that 'all sorts of passion' is too comprehensive a phrase. Cook did not, however, make the mistake of thinking that Aristotle's definition of tragedy called for a spectacle in which the reward of virtue was to be protracted, though he admits that "there are other kinds of tragedy, no doubt, where the good and the bad are rewarded."* He is correct in his observation that "our pity is engaged for the persons represented, and our terror is upon our own account."† His idea of the character of the tragic hero is the same as that of Aristotle; for he says, "the only character then, most fitted for a tragical subject, lies in the middle, neither eminently good, nor eminently bad, where the misfortunes are not the effects of deliberate vice, but of some involuntary fault."‡ Judged by such principles, Shakespeare is to be blamed for *Macbeth* and *Richard III.*, even though Cook is silent on this particular point.

The publication of *The Elements of Dramatic Criticism* in 1775 supplies us with a sort of transitional

* Ibid.

† Ibid.

‡ Ibid., p. 31.

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stage in Dr. Johnson's development as a dramatic critic: before that time Dr. Johnson approved of the doctrine of poetic justice; after that time he rejected it. Cook himself follows Aristotle by admitting the application of the rule to some kinds of tragedy, while finding no place for it in the ideal type. Poetic justice calls for a representation of the rewards of virtue as well as the punishments of vice; whereas true tragedy, according to Aristotle and Cook, deals chiefly with the misfortunes of a character moderately good and moderately bad.

In Volume I. of the *Retrospective Review*, published in London in 1820, we find an excellent discussion of the doctrine of poetic justice. The very first article in the *Review* deals with Rymer and his theory of tragedy, but it is rather expository than critical. Article X. in the same volume is far more interesting and valuable, for it contains an up-to-date argument against the "ridiculous doctrine." The article deals with the writings of John Dennis, chiefly for the purpose of analyzing his views in regard to the doctrine of rewards and punishments, which, as the author of the article declared, "involves one of those mistakes in humanity which it is always desirable to expose."* Then, after quoting a lengthy passage from Dennis, the reviewer goes on to say, "It may be sufficient answer to all this—and much more of the same kind which our author has adduced—that little good can be attained by representations which are perpetually at variance with our ordinary preceptions. The poet may represent

* *Retrospective Review*, 1820, Vol. I., p. 311.

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humanity as mightier and fairer than it appears to a common observer. In the mirror which he 'holds up to nature' the forms of might and of beauty may look more august, more lovely, or more harmonious, than they appear in the 'light of common day,' to eyes which are ungifted with poetic vision. But if the world of imagination is directly opposed to that of reality, it will become a cold abstraction, a baseless dream, a splendid mockery. We shall strive in vain to make man sympathise with beings of a sphere purely ideal, where might shall be always right, and virtue its own present as well as exceeding great reward."*

It is hardly necessary to make any comment on a criticism so explicit as this. Addison and Dr. Johnson had given expression to the same thoughts, but not so forcibly, when they argued that the drama should give us a picture of life. In some respects our reviewer of 1820 goes deeper into the analysis of the problem than any of his predecessors, for he rejects the doctrine of poetic justice, and discovers in the violation of that law a lesson of moral import. "Though the poet," he says, "can not make us witnesses of the future recompense of that virtue, which here struggles and suffers, he can cause us to feel, in the midst of its very struggles and sufferings that it is eternal. He makes the principle of immortality manifest in the meek submission, in the deadly wrestle with fate, and even in the mortal agonies of his noblest characters."

But our reviewer is not ready to give the

* Ibid.

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dramatist unlimited freedom. He will not allow the drama to be injurious to the morals of society. He wishes to avoid the abuses for which the stage was noted in those times when Puritanism made its most violent attacks upon plays and players. The doctrine of poetic justice became a bye word with critics as a result of an effort to make the effect of the drama harmonize with the moral law. Our reviewer has shown how that harmony may be preserved even when the good perish, but he does not pretend to show how such harmony can exist if the drama be without law to regulate it. He has no prejudices; he is willing to have it serve a good purpose in literary criticism, and he assigns to it the duty of keeping strict watch upon the real immoralities of the stage; for he says, "The only real violation of poetical justice is in the violation of nature, to array vice in attractive qualities, which excite an interest in its favor, whatever may be its destiny. When, for example, a wretch, whose trade is murder, is represented as cherishing the purest and deepest love for an innocent being—when chivalrous delicacy of sentiment is conferred on a pirate, tainted with a thousand crimes—the effect is immoral, whatever doom may, at last, await him. If the barriers of virtue and of evil are melted down by the current of spurious sympathy, there is no catastrophe which can remove the mischief; and, while these are preserved in our feelings, there is none which can truly harm us. Virtue makes even the deeper impression when it is afflicted."*

* Ibid., p. 312.

RECENT OPINIONS

RECENT OPINIONS ABOUT POETIC JUSTICE.

What, it may be asked, is the present day attitude in regard to the vexing problem? What is the outcome of the war that has been waged in literary criticism? In some respects the war has not been ended, though the field over which it is now waged is not so extensive as formerly. Critics will no longer be heard if they attempt to argue that Richard III. is so excessively wicked that he can not be punished according to the requirements of poetic justice; nor will they be heard if they condemn Shakespeare for the unhappy deaths of Cordelia and Desdemona. There is, however, a tendency to regard poetic justice as one of the legitimate determinants of fate, but not the only one. We are aware that poetic justice was, without any question whatever, the determinant of fate in Rymer's *Edgar*. He wrote his play to illustrate the workings of his theory. We know, also, that many of Dryden's plays were written within the limitations imposed by such a rule, and we have Dryden's own words for this. Dennis and Gildon also wrote plays in which poetic justice was unquestionably the determinant of fate. It is proper, therefore, to regard poetic justice as a determinant of fate in the drama. To this, no one can reasonably object. To say, however, that this must be the determinant of fate in all tragedies, or what is more, in all kinds of drama, is to advocate an extreme rule against which literary criticism has rebelled ever since the days of Addison. Present-day literary criticism has worked out the problem of the determinant of fate in a scientific

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manner; and to no one, more than to Professor Moulton, is due the credit of putting the best ideas on the subject in such a form that they may be readily understood.

It is easy to get the impression that Professor Moulton is an extremist in his views on poetic justice, because he makes such a systematic effort to show a just relation between sin and its consequences. Wherever, in Shakespeare's plays, a great crime is committed, he endeavors to show how the act brings upon itself the retribution which follows. But Moulton does not bind himself to any theory of poetic justice. Chance itself is to be regarded as a determinant of fate, destiny is another determinant, and to these he adds two others called a personal providence, and an accumulation of pathos. These determinants of fate may be found operating in different plays by the same author, and sometimes two or more of them may be found in a single play. Many of the Greek tragedies have destiny as a determinant of fate. Shakespeare's *Tempest* illustrates the workings of a personal providence in the character of Prospero. Desdemona's death is an illustration of an accumulation of pathos and has a beauty of its own that satisfies high ideals in dramatic art. In *Macbeth* we have the workings of Nemesis, a term used to indicate a modified conception of poetic justice; and in *Romeo and Juliet* we find chance operating to bring about the issues of the play. Moulton, then, did not go to the extreme of making poetic justice the only determinant of fate, nor did he formulate for it a definition to which exception might be readily taken.

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What Moulton understands by poetic justice were best presented in his own words. "The first of the great determinants of fate in the drama," he says, in his work on *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, "is Poetic Justice. What exactly is the meaning of this term. It is often understood to mean the correction of justice, as if justice in poetry were more just than the justice of real life. But this is not supported by the facts of dramatic story. An English judge and jury* would revolt against measuring out to Shylock the justice that is meted to him by the court of Venice, though the same persons beholding the scene in a theatre might feel their sense of Poetic Justice satisfied; unless, indeed, which might easily happen, the confusion of ideas suggested by this term operated to check their acquiescence in the issues of the play. A better notion of Poetic Justice is to understand it as the modification of justice by considerations of art. This holds good even where justice and retribution determine the fate of individuals in the Drama; in these cases our dramatic satisfaction still rests not on the high degree of justice exhibited, but on the artistic mode in which it works. A policeman catching a thief with his hand in a neighbor's pocket and bringing him to summary punishment affords an example of complete justice, yet its very success robs it of all poetic qualities; the same thief defeating all the natural machinery of the law, yet overtaken

* Rymer, *Last Age*, p. 25. "Poetry," he says, "discovered crimes the Law would never find out; and punished those the Law had acquitted."

† Moulton, *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, p. 255.

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after all by a questionable ruse would be to the poetic sense far more interesting."†

This exposition of poetic justice takes into account only in a very uncertain degree the original notion of an exact distribution of rewards and punishments. When the doctrine was first discussed by Rymer in such a way as to give it a distinctive place in literary criticism, emphasis was laid on the fact that each and every one of the characters in the drama should be rewarded or punished according to a common standard of justice. Besides this it was required, as Moulton observes, that the punishments imposed should be more severe than those which the civil law would allow. To some extent the seventeenth century idea of artistic method in retribution is similar to that which Moulton illustrates. In its main features, however, the idea is so transformed as to be made acceptable. Above all things, it is not a hard and fast rule against which dramatist must not offend. When Moulton proposes Pathos as one of the determinants of fate, he shows clearly that he rejects poetic justice as a universal rule of tragedy.

Moulton's idea of poetic justice is such as to admit of subdivision. First of all, he recognizes a form of poetic justice which he calls Nemesis. By this he means the "artistic link between sin and retribution."* Besides Nemesis there are other forms which he distinguishes by no special name. He makes this distinction, however: Nemesis implies a relation between sin and retribution; other forms may involve no sin whatsoever, as, for instance,

* Ibid.

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the case where "fate may be out of accord with character, and the correction of this ill distribution will satisfy the dramatic sense."* By means of these subdivisions of the subject Moulton stretches the idea of poetic justice to the farthest limits, and then finding that it will not serve all the needs of dramatic art, he says that "however widely the term be stretched, justice is only one of the determinants of fate."†

The great mistake of many critics has been to read too much into literature. Moulton has almost placed himself among the number of these by discovering in Shakespeare more than Shakespeare was consciously responsible for. In his work called *The Moral System in Shakespeare*, and later called *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Thinker*, Moulton makes a most interesting attempt to show that Shakespeare's plays are filled with lessons of great moral import. That any great poet in any age could consciously work out all the intricate relations which Moulton discovers in the plays of Shakespeare would be quite improbable. Moulton saves himself from reproach by merely observing the harmony existing between crime and retribution; he does not maintain that Shakespeare deliberately intended or was aware of all these poetical effects.

It is hard for the literary artist, or the literary critic, or the general public, to get away from the thought that our ideas of justice must not be violated by dramatic spectacles. This same spirit shows itself in the technical instruction which is set before the young playwright. In a recent work called

* Ibid., p. 257.

† Ibid.

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The Technique of the Drama, I find a definition which calls for a recognition of the principle of rewards and punishments. The author of the work, W. T. Price, has the following to say on the subject: "That idea only is dramatic that can be put into shape of sustained action—an action that is complete and organic, with unity of theme and purpose, that invites our attention at the outset, arouses an interest as it proceeds, and conforms itself in our sympathies, at last coming to a conclusion in its disposition of the characters that accords with our views of justice."*

Courtney, in a book called *The Idea of Tragedy*, expresses the modern attitude of literary men to the question of poetic justice. Referring to the origins of the drama, he notes that in combination with the "notion of divine jealousy, we find the idea also of an inexorable law of destiny to which the Olympian Gods were themselves subject, a great hard iron despotism of fate, without ears to listen to human prayers, without eyes to see the range of human misery. It was an irreverent theory for any one who believed that the world was governed by intelligence, regulated by justice, and tempered with mercy; moreover, for purposes of tragedy, it was an undramatic theory."† This is Courtney's introduction to a discussion of Greek tragedy, wherein he shows how the dramatists avoided a portrayal of the workings of an absolutely blind fate, but chose rather to account for the unhappiness of their heroes by discovering some frailty in their characters.

* Price, *The Technique of the Drama*, p. 2.

† Courtney, *The Idea of Tragedy*, pp. 19-20.

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"Observe," says Courtney, "with what punctilious jealousy Æschylus holds the scales even," in the case of Orestes. "He shall be punished, driven from land to land by the Furies, which in other words, are strings of conscience; but he shall be saved at last, because the motive of his actions was a good one, and because Zeus wills not the death of a sinner. Will you say there is no justice in divine decrees? Will you say that man is helpless in the hands of fate? Will you say that the laws of heredity are adamant in their force and stringency? Æschylus will not have it so. The divine ordinance is worked out through human frailty. No one is punished, except for acts of cruelty, which, in themselves, invite their proper retribution."* Here we see the method Courtney follows in reading poetic justice into the ancient Greek drama. In this, he is only doing what was done by many others before him, though all do not agree that the Greek drama illustrates the theory with sufficient regularity to be a warrant for the conclusions drawn.

However willing Courtney was to admit that the Greeks observed the law of poetic justice, he was very far from granting that Shakespeare did anything of that kind. He himself asks the question directly, "was Shakespeare a believer in poetic justice?"† His answer to the question is very positive and in the negative, and he bases his judgment on practically the same argument that was used by Dr. Johnson in his *Life of Addison* in 1779. "Good and evil," says Courtney, "are great facts in human life, and it is absurd to say that good always triumphs. Evil

* Ibid., p. 24.

† Ibid., pp. 66-67.

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triumphs as well. Looking at the mundane sphere in which the beneficent and maleficent forces are warring, we can not say that everything is for the best in this best of possible worlds. But there is a higher form of poetic justice, which means nothing more and nothing less than being true to the facts." Here we have the defence of Shakespeare based upon the idea that it is the business of the drama 'to hold the mirror up to nature.' It is substantially the same argument as Addison used in defending the liberties of the stage, and in its main features has been used by all the defenders of Shakespeare who are opposed to the doctrine of poetic justice.

But some of the modern critics of Shakespeare have attempted to show that he has not violated this rule. Gervinus and Ulrici among the Germans, and Snider here in our own country, have accepted the doctrine of poetic justice with all the hardships it imposes on tragedy, and have endeavored to explain away many of the difficulties which Shakespeare puts in their way, not by saying that Shakespeare is at fault, but by showing that the difficulty is merely imaginary. They will not admit that Desdemona or Cordelia, for instance, are faultless. They try to show that real faults were committed, and for these they were punished. Desdemona married a man not of her race. Cordelia did not answer her father in a fitting manner, Lear committed an act of imprudence in the division of his Kingdom,—such are the faults that are to be punished by death. Gervinus finds that Duncan, Banquo and Macduff are all guilty in a degree that justifies

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the calamities which befell them.* Ulrici adopts the same system of defence for Shakespeare that is found in Gervinus.† Duncan, he tells us is weak, a coward, unfit for the duties of his office, and therefore he is justly slain. Macduff committed a fault, inasmuch as he fled from home and country too hastily,—at least, he showed neglect for his family, and was therefore responsible for the calamity which befell his children. At the same time, he was punished not by the loss of his own life but by the loss of those whom he had neglected. Banquo is also an example of poetic justice, because he was arrogantly complacent when he contemplated the honors that might come to him, or at least to his descendants. He should have checked Macbeth's ambition and restrained his own; but he failed to do so, and therefore his crime. It is in such a manner as this that Ulrici illustrates the unswerving obedience of Shakespeare to the law of poetic justice. Similarly Snider shows his loyalty to the doctrine of rewards and punishments, by discovering human frailties and

* Gervinus, *Shakespeare Commentaries*, pp. 605 ff. "As regards poetic justice in the fates of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff," says Gervinus, "there lies in the nature of all a contrast to that of Macbeth. King Duncan is characterized in history as a man of greater weakness than became a King. Want of foresight ruins Banquo. He had been initiated into the secret of the weird sisters; pledged to openness towards Macbeth, he had opportunity of convincing himself of his obduracy and secrecy; he guesses at, and strongly suspects Macbeth's deed; yet he does nothing against him or in self-defence. Macduff is not quite so culpable—he is not, therefore, punished in his own person but in the fate of his family."

† Ulrici, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*, I., pp. 473 ff.

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punishable sins in such faultless creatures as Desdemona and Cordelia. Like Moulton, he evolves out of Shakespeare a voluminous system of morality, but is gifted with less literary skill as a writer, and with less scientific method as a literary critic.

CONCLUSION.

The difference between the two schools of literary interpretation is striking in more respects than one. If there is any highly unpoetical dogma of dramatic criticism, it is the dogma which is called poetic justice. Those who were the most famous exponents of this dogma were at the same time the most unworthy of praise from the point of view of literary art. No critic is to be lauded for maintaining that a good play can not be written without observing the rule in every detail. Genius in any form of art has been first of all a contributor to the world's civilization and after that a contributor of raw materials to some maker of the rules of art. But genius is not to be bound down by any rules as such. Before Homer sang, there was no one to teach him the laws of the epic; before Phidias and Praxiteles and the other great sculptors made images of gods and men in ivory and in marble, there was no one to say what they should not do; before the architects of Greece built their wondrous temples, there was no one to describe the possibilities of their art. And so it was with all the achievements of the great minds of men in the dawn of the world's civilization. The rules that govern art are an after-thought in the minds of lesser men. And if all the rules of tragedy were enunciated before Shakespeare made

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his name as a writer of plays, it is either an accident that he complied with such rules, or else he gave to the world a new type of drama with rules of its own.

But it is not necessary to think that Shakespeare introduced a new type of drama,—it is merely necessary to put him in a class with Æschylus and Sophocles and Euripides when the time comes to reduce the practice of the world's masters of the dramatic art to a body of rules. Dryden was sorry that Aristotle had not postponed the publication of his *Poetics* until he had a chance to read the plays which had been written as late as the end of the seventeenth century. There may have been a note of egotism in what Dryden said, but there was at the same time a suggestion of good sense. And Moulton is right in his idea about inductive criticism, provided, of course, he approves of no resulting principles that are opposed to the fundamental laws of morality. He believes that rules, in order to be truly expressive of the character of any art, must be based on data gathered from the entire field embraced by that art. This is particularly true as regards Shakespeare's relation to the laws of the drama; and he is not to be condemned by any rule of Aristotle merely because it was formulated by an eminent critic.

We have characterized the doctrine of poetic justice, in its strict sense, as the most unpoetical of literary dogmas. To illustrate the truth of this assertion, let us call attention again to some of the applications of the doctrine. On the one hand, poetic justice says Desdemona committed a crime for which she was justly punished by death, and we

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are asked to believe that because of this fact the portrayal of her character is poetical. On the other hand, poetic justice says that Shakespeare violated a principle of poetical art in bringing Desdemona to so unhappy an end, and for this reason we are asked to believe that the portrayal of her character is not poetry. In either case, it is difficult to accept the judgment of the literary critic.

The poetical test is too mechanical, too arbitrary, too cold and unartistic. Against the critics who would apply such a test, let us quote the words of Courtney on the same subject. "If history," he says, "does not teach that the world is governed by moral laws, it is difficult to know what it does teach, for it assuredly does not suggest a reign of chaos. And if this be so—and most certainly Shakespeare thought it was so—you can extract from Shakespeare's plays a great justification of the ways of Providence to men. Ask, for instance, whether our moral conscience is satisfied in his treatment of the human drama, and there can only be an affirmative reply. To talk of Shakespeare as a pessimist is absurd. The real pessimism is the discovery that human happiness is unattainable. Plenty of men and students who are not pessimists have discovered that. The real pessimism is despair of human virtue, and that Shakespeare never so much as suggests. On the contrary he believes in human virtue, and paints it with a loving hand. Human virtue may often go down before the assaults of evil—Desdemona is ensnared in the webs spun by Iago—but, nevertheless, it is its own exceeding great reward,—and the dead Cordelia in King Lear's

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arms triumphantly proclaims that self-devotion, whether it succumbs or fails, is the highest of moral excellences."

The critic who looks at the deaths of Cordelia and Desdemona in such a light as that which illumines the plays of Shakespeare for a man like Courtney, finds in them poetry of the finest kind, and can help others to see the beauties he sees and to feel the emotions that thrill his soul; but such a vision is not granted the cold, unemotional analyst who justifies the relations of the play by the scientific methods of Gervinus, Ulrici and Snider, nor will any one be helped by such methods to a realization of the wondrous beauty that is star-lit with sorrow and the charming tenderness of a life that is rendered eternally impressive by death.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

The author of this work was born at Rockford, Illinois, January 14, 1874. In May, 1887, he entered the preparatory department of the University of Notre Dame, at Notre Dame, Indiana; and in June, 1893, he was graduated in the college department of the same institution, receiving the degree of Bachelor of Arts. In August of the same year he entered the Novitiate of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, and in September of the following year became a member of the faculty of Sacred Heart College, Watertown, Wisconsin. The next three years were spent at Brookland, D. C., in Theological studies at Holy Cross College, and in graduate study for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Catholic University of America. In June, 1897, he received from the University of Notre Dame the degree of Master of Arts, and in September of the same year was ordained priest. From September, 1898, till June, 1902, he was a member of the faculty of the University of Notre Dame, and was then appointed president of Columbia University, Portland, Oregon, a position which he held till the summer of 1906 when he returned to Notre Dame, to become again a member of the faculty of the University. While still engaged in his work as professor at Notre Dame he undertook the task of preparing the dissertation which is here

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

presented to the faculty of the Catholic University of America in partial fulfilment of the conditions for receiving the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in June, 1910.

M. A. Q.

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